

## Interview with Montana State University Alum, Jason Baldes, M.S.: Buffalo Advocate



Dr. Barbara Komlos, PNW-COSMOS program administrator at Montana State University, caught up with Jason Baldes, who graduated with an M.S. in Land Resources Environmental Science (2016), and who currently is the Director of the Wind River Advocacy Center in Fort Washakie, WY. She asked him about his journey before and after his graduate studies, and his work as an advocate for the reintroduction of buffalo to the Wind River Indian Reservation in Wyoming that became a reality in November 2016

### **1. What motivated you to pursue a graduate degree? Who/what were your inspirations?**

After receiving my Bachelor's degree in Land Resources and Environmental Sciences, it was a natural progression to continue my studies in a graduate degree program in the same discipline. As an undergraduate I chose research topics centered on bison, and participated in a program called American Indian Research Opportunities (AIRO), which led to a Secondary Transition to Employment Program (STEP) appointment with the US Geological Survey to work directly with a bison specialist, Dr. Peter Gogan. It was in this internship that I focused my attention on drafting a buffalo management proposal for the Wind River Indian Reservation (WRIR). My motivation was encouraged by the passage of a resolution in March of 2010 by the Eastern Shoshone General Council in

support of bison restoration to the WRIR. Having obtained the support of the tribe, I decided it was the right time to pursue graduate studies around buffalo restoration. I sought and was granted funding from the EPA, the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation and others to support my research.

I have been inspired by my dad, a retired fish and wildlife biologist. I have great memories with him in the backcountry of the WRIR collecting fish and water samples from the lakes in the wilderness/roadless areas of the reservation. This is actually the very first Wilderness Area in the US established in 1938, twenty-six years before the Federal Wilderness Act. Much of my childhood was spent on horseback, if not gathering data about fisheries or water resources, then hunting elk, deer and antelope or fishing the abundant streams and rivers on the WRIR. I had a great childhood, learning about the natural world from a great teacher, mentor, and leader.

My dad and I took a trip to East Africa in 1997 and it was there that I had a life-changing experience that set my course for years to come. We visited many places and national parks such as Amboselli, Tarangire, Masai Mara, Mount Kenya, and Ngorongoro Crater. But most significantly, my experience on the Serengeti with the wildebeest migration was monumental. The 1.5 million animals in the wildebeest migration, today the largest ungulate migration in the world, is just a large, abstract number until one witnesses their journey in person. We drove for miles through the migration for nearly two days, seeing a multitude of other species in participation. The sheer number was awe-inspiring. However, what was even more unfathomable for me was that we, as Americans, had a "Serengeti" of our own not so long ago. Our "Serengeti" was considerably larger though. In fact, the migrating wildebeests consist of less than 5% of what our buffalo or bison population was less than 200 years ago. Witnessing it in person, the dichotomy between ungulate management in African nations and the United States, wildebeest and bison respectively, challenged me to look at the history of buffalo and Native Americans. Being a Native American (Eastern Shoshone), I was aware of how important buffalo were to us historically and culturally; however, not having had the opportunity to grow up around them, I didn't have a personal connection.

The history of the American bison is very much inter-related with the dependence that Native Americans have on the animal. The bison were nearly wiped out due to the political socio-economic relations between the Plains Indian societies and the young, U.S. federal government. Currently both buffalo and Native Americans, with similar histories, reside in remnants of our once vast territories; buffalo in national parks and refuges and Native Americans on reservations. When I returned to the United States, I had a new found appreciation of my

home, culture, people, and land base. Restoration of buffalo to the Wind River Reservation has been my commitment since those days on the Serengeti.

**2. Have you always been interested in “science”? How do you define “science” from your personal (including indigenous) perspective? How did you choose your degree of study?**

I have always been interested in science, although much of my life growing up, I didn't realize that is what it was. “Science” was a natural way of looking at things. Riding horses along the trail, I remember my father naming the forbs and grasses in scientific and common names, and explaining how they have been used by our people. Native people always have been scientists. Ecology is a discipline that mirrors Native philosophical values, but lacks the spiritual interconnectedness that is prevalent in Native ways of knowing. In this way of thinking, everything is related, *everything*. I had the opportunity to grow up with the outdoor world as part of my reality; questioning and experimenting and inquiry came naturally. Unfortunately today, many young people do not have the opportunities that I had, and the connection to the natural world is becoming more and more scarce for all young people, Native and non-Native alike.

I chose Land Resources and Environmental Sciences as a degree because it provided the opportunity to take a multidisciplinary approach to my education. This degree option provided foundational understanding in biology, ecology, chemistry, ethno-botany, statistical analysis, soil remediation, and more. I am very thankful to have had the opportunity to participate in several research projects, including investigations into alternative methods to invasive fish eradication, effects of Indigenous wildfire management, and projects that took me to New Zealand, Russia, and Denmark.

**3. What were the challenges to earning a Master's of Science degree? Were they different from challenges you might have had earning a Bachelor's degree? Who/what helped you meet the challenges?**

The challenges of earning a Master's of Science degree were many. The hardest part about the experience was being able to pay the bills. Having a family during my college years was difficult because it meant that we had to be away from home (the Wind River Reservation) for some time, ten years in fact. Having sufficient income to go to the university and raise a family was difficult. Many of my challenges were due to my own issues. I developed my own thesis topic, and made it way harder than it needed to be for a Master's program. As a graduate student, you have to hold yourself accountable, and use time management effectively, which can be difficult if you procrastinate. One must keep one's goal in mind at all times and continue even when it seems like it's impossible.

Pursuing a Master's degree was the hardest thing I have ever set out to do. I eventually narrowed down my thesis topic to: "Cultural Plant Biodiversity in Relic-Like Bison Wallows on the Wind River Indian Reservation and, Tribal Bison Restoration and Policy." These topics could have been separate thesis topics in and of themselves. I received great support and understanding from my committee, who understood the greater implication of this work to my home community. Montana State University has a great Native American community that supports each other in our academic, social, and familial efforts. My graduate studies, however, would not have been possible without the financial support from programs like the Sloan Indigenous Graduate Partnership, the EPA STAR Fellowship, the Native Science Scholars Program of Hope Mountain, and others.

**4. What does having a Master's degree mean to you personally? Does it have a special meaning to your family, tribe, and community? What have you been able to accomplish with the degree that you might not have been able to without it?**

Having a Master's degree means a great deal to me personally, it is priceless. An education is something that can never be taken away from someone. Many of our old Native American chiefs from many nations used wise words about education, but I like what Chief Plenty Coups from the Crow Nation said, "Education is your greatest weapon. With education you are the white man's equal, without education you are his victim and so shall remain all of your lives. Study, learn, help one another always. Remember there is only poverty and misery in idleness and dreams – but in work there is self-respect and independence."

Having a Master's degree has afforded me opportunities that I did not know were available, and wouldn't have been accessible to me without the degree. It has opened doors and will continue to as long as I remain committed to making positive changes for my home and my community. I have been able to return home, after taking 10 years of my life (and my family's) to Montana to further my knowledge, and help to return the buffalo to the reservation. Ever since those days on the Serengeti, I have dreamed of the day when they would return to the Shoshone people. As the Shoshone Buffalo Representative for the Tribe, I have had the opportunity to work closely with the Tribal Lands Partnerships Program of the National Wildlife Federation along with the US Fish and Wildlife Service to reestablish a population to the WRIR. That historic event happened on November 1<sup>st</sup> of 2016. (Follow the story at: <http://blog.nwf.org/2016/11/after-131-years-buffalo-return-home-to-the-wind-river-reservation/>)

I have taken steps to simplify my life. For the past 3 summers my wife and I have lived in our teepee and currently live in a yurt or “ger,” the Indigenous home of people from Central Asia. I currently write this warmed by a wood stove with no electricity or running water in a Wyoming winter. The Indigenous people of this land have had to endure tremendous obstacles and by choosing to live simply, I am reminded often of the struggle my people had to go through for me to be here today. Having an education allows me the choice to live this way, and the ability to continue to fight for rights that are still being threatened. There are many challenges tribes and Native people have to face, yet it is our responsibility as Native Nations, to maintain sovereignty, work for self-determination, and uphold trust-responsibility. Without these inherent rights as Indigenous people, our existence is under threat as much today as it was a hundred years ago.

Cultural revitalization and ecological integrity are maintained by reconnecting with our belief ways and relationships with our relatives. Restoring the buffalo helps us to heal from the atrocities of the past; they took care of us, now it’s our turn to take care of them. We must all fight for our buffalo.

