

Agriculture by Marcia Merry

Buffalo instead of people?

Why the kooky idea of giving the Great Plains over to the buffalo is suddenly getting national publicity.

During the month of August, dozens of national and regional press ran stories on a proposal to drive people off the Great Plains and repopulate the 10-state region with buffalo.

Called the "Buffalo Commons," this proposal was authored in 1987 by Frank and Deborah Popper, two academics from the Rutgers University urban studies and geography departments, who wrote an article at that time, called "From Dust to Dust." The piece advanced the absurd thesis that the Great Plains were unsuitable for humans, and inevitably must be depopulated.

Such an idea would have ended in the dustbin, except for two growing trends that have resulted in feature coverage in the *Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times*, *Washington Post* and dozens of farm publications. First, the policy of the U.S. Department of Agriculture and Congress has been to promote what they call the "rural transition" of people away from farming, and into non-farm activities, or simply exodus from farm states. Second, the Environmental Protection Agency and radical environmentalist lobby assert that modern farming inevitably pollutes and ruins the land.

The "Buffalo Commons" idea of the Poppers, as carried in the *Washington Post*, the *Sacramento Bee*, and other newspapers, said: "During the next generation, as a result of the largest, longest-running agricultural and environmental miscalculation in the nation's history, much of the Plains will become almost totally depopulated. The federal government should begin planning to convert vast stretch-

es of the region to a use so old it pre-dates the American presence—a 'Buffalo Commons' of native grass and livestock."

The Poppers propose that the government could easily arrange to buy back land from farmers "under distress sale circumstances." They propose: "Government should also take responsibility for easing the social transition of people either bought or forced off the Plains. The government will have to invent a 1990s version of the 1930s Resettlement Administration, a social work-finance-technical-assistance agency." Second, "the federal government should take the emptied Plains and tear down the fences, replant the shortgrass and restock the animals, including many bison—creating what we would call the Buffalo Commons."

The response to these proposals from Plains states officials and residents has been to ridicule the Poppers for their "buffalo pie-in-the sky" ideas. A Kansas congressman remarked on the low level of university research reflected by the Poppers. They teach at Rutgers, a land-grant college which, in recent years, has hosted specialists on "land trust," "transferable development rights," and other land-grab schemes, mostly modeled on British post-empire swindles that allow the government to dispossess ordinary citizens on behalf of elite, special interests.

The Buffalo Commons concept is a warmed-over version of the old British colonialist dream of an empty Africa, populated only by wild grass and wild game.

The Poppers scoff at the loss to the food supply that shutting down Great Plains agriculture would mean. They say that people now prefer "chicken and fish, which the region does not produce."

In addition to the immorality shown by the Poppers' proposals, their idea is based on the absurd and unscientific assertion that the Great Plains are inappropriate to agriculture and man, because they are dry. They state: "The long-term outlook for the Plains is frightening. Water supplies are diminishing, primarily because of agriculture overuse."

In reality, the 10 states of the Great Plains, plus the Canadian Prairies, could produce many times more food than at present, if the North American Water and Power Alliance development project is carried out. NAWAPA, designed in 1965, would divert to the south, water now flowing into the Arctic from the MacKenzie River basin in the northern Rockies.

There are similar large-scale water development projects for other areas of the world that could open up vast potentials for agriculture and population growth.

Instead of this development perspective, the "Buffalo Commons" anti-development outlook is an example of the kooky ideas that are being publicized today, as part of a campaign to condition the public to deprivation and misery.

The September issue of *Scientific American* features a series of articles in a "Special Issue" collection called "Managing Planet Earth," which present pseudo-scientific justifications for the idea of depopulating agricultural regions, in the name of "saving" the environment. The articles repeatedly speak of how "harsh technologies," such as water projects, are "burdens" to planet Earth, and how the human population must be curbed.