

Re-visioning Reconciliation Through the Buffalo

Toni Warrior

My name is Toni Warrior. I'm from Piikani Nation in southern Alberta. My parents are Roxanne Warrior and Laverne Jackson. My late maternal grandparents are Eleanor and Edward Warrior. My paternal grandparents are Betsy Jackson and the late Edward Whitford. I am a mother of one child.

The buffalo was the basis of the traditional way of life for the Plains Indians. The buffalo provided food, shelter, clothing, and other necessities. The buffalo meat, including the heart, liver, kidneys and tongue, was eaten. The buffalo skin was used for clothing, drums, bedding, and tipi coverings, the sinew for thread, and the strings for hunting bows. The tails were used for whips, the stomachs for cooking pots and water buckets, and the bladders for food and storage. The bones were used as needles and for games. Ribs were used for arrow shafts, shinbones as knives for scraping hides, and shoulder blades as digging tools or hammers. And the skull was used too: painted and used in ceremonies. The bone marrow was used for fuel for fire and the bone ends were used as paintbrushes. The hide from the neck was used for warrior shields, and the horns were used for spoons, cups, and ladles, and for rattles as well. The brain was used for tanning skins and the teeth became necklaces.

The Plains Indians had different ways of hunting the buffalo. There was stalking, surrounding, the pound, and the jump. The oldest method of hunting is stalking. In stalking, the hunter had an advantage due to the buffalo's poor vision but he had a disadvantage in dealing with the wind direction, as the buffalo had a good sense of smell. Often, hunters would dress as wolves or as buffalo calves and crawl on their hands and knees until the hunter got close enough to strike the buffalo in the right place. This method took great patience and was mainly used when small quantities of meat were needed.

The second way was surrounding. The hunters would surround the buffalo, approaching the buffalo on different sides from a distance on a day that was not windy, in order to enclose and kill the buffalo. This was also done on horseback years later after the Spanish brought the horse.

In the pound approach, the buffalo were corralled by the hunters using driving lanes. Other hunters would use various ways of keeping the buffalo from changing lanes, such as waving blankets.

Another way of hunting buffalo was the jump. The buffalo hunters or "runners" would keep the buffalo running in lanes toward a cliff. Because the buffalo were running at full speed with the sun blinding them, they did not know how far the drop was. This method was used for large quantities of meat, especially just before the winter season approached.

The Plains people followed the herds of buffalo because the buffalo, of course, provided everything they needed in life. Without the buffalo they had nothing. The buffalo was a sacred animal to the Plains Indians and it playing an important part in belief, ritual, and ceremony. Buffalo skulls were placed at the entrance of a sweat lodge. The buffalo's tongue, heart, and liver were eaten by the men to give them strength in vision quests. The white buffalo was sacred and an extension to healing.

The destruction of the buffalo on the Great Plains happened between 1840 and 1885. Settlers homesteaded, towns were built, and railroads were constructed across the plains. These activities destroyed the buffalo's natural habitat and introduced new diseases, all contributing to the destruction of the buffalo.

The Plains people realized Europeans were destroying their traditional ways of life. When the buffalo herds were destroyed, the people had no source of food or shelter, and they were forced to move into reservations. The destruction of the buffalo meant the destruction of their traditional ways of life and that meant that the Plains people were no longer self-sufficient. Indigenous people were restricted to the reservations and, generation after generation, the people started to lose their connection to the land. Treaties were signed between the Indigenous people and the Crown, promising compensation and outlining ways in which the land would be shared. The treaties promised that reserve lands were for Indigenous people to live on without interference by settlers (Venne, 2011). The Indian agent was to be a servant to the Indigenous people and the treaty money was a gift from the Queen for signing the treaty. Other treaty promises included: healthcare for all Indigenous people; education for all Indigenous people; rights to water for fish and animals; fishing, hunting, and trapping rights; and police action for anyone who violated the lands which were reserved for the Indigenous people.

Re-visioning reconciliation through the buffalo would be fulfilling the treaty promises made in the treaties after the destruction of the buffalo.

References

- Venne, S. H. (2011). Treaties made in good faith. *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature*, 34(1), 1-16.