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***FACING THE STORM: STORY OF THE AMERICAN BISON PREMIERES ON
INDEPENDENT LENS ON THURSDAY, APRIL 26, 2012 AT 10 PM***

Film Asks the Question: “Can We Let Bison Be Bison?”

“The only animal that we don’t allow to be wild in North America is the one that was symbolic of the wild.” – Dan Flores, author of *The Natural West*

(San Francisco, CA) — *Facing the Storm: Story of the American Bison* is the far-reaching and complex history of human relations with the largest land mammal in North America. One of the most enduring and iconic images of the West — once numbering in the millions — bison have been reduced to a few pockets of remnant populations, and the land “where the buffalo roam” no longer exists. Confronting the chasm between the myth and the reality of the American West, *Facing the Storm* introduces viewers to the rich sweep of human sustenance, exploitation, conservation, and spiritual relations with the ultimate symbol of wild America. In a post-Manifest Destiny culture that has repeatedly brought the species to near-extinction, the film asks: Can we let bison be bison? Or are they destined to “range” only in zoos or ranches as a reminder of the once-wild West? Featuring rare archival images, original animation, and stunning wildlife photography of these magnificent animals, *Facing the Storm: Story of the American Bison* premieres on the Emmy® Award-winning PBS series *Independent Lens*, hosted by Mary Louise Parker on Thursday, April 26, 2012 at 10 PM (check local listings).

Facing the Storm tells the story through the voices of its three main characters: the American bison, the Americans who understand and care about them, and the landscape they both inhabit: the American West. The film reveals the bison’s behavior — in and out of their natural habitat, and in relationship to one another and to humans — helping us to understand and care about the life of this symbolic giant. Called “Faces the Storm” by Native Americans, bison were observed



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to turn and walk into snowstorms in order to get through them faster. And while the bison can't speak for themselves, their story is told by their modern-day heroes: Native Americans, biologists, ranchers and bison advocates who are collaborating in a visionary effort to re-establish bison in their native habitat. Finally, the omnipresent character of the American West — real and mythical — the landscape in which the story unfolds, adds its own distinctive voice to the struggle for survival and ecological balance that continues to this day.

To understand the current crisis, the film touches on the most significant points in the history of bison survival, including the tragic trajectory of the 19th century, when commercial hunting for prized buffalo robes and hides evolved into a deliberate program of bison eradication. By the end of the century, Plains tribes were forced onto reservations and bison herds were reduced to less than 1,000 animals from the original 30-60 million that once grazed in North America.

Once brought to the brink of extinction, bison have survived, but myriad political factors keep their status as truly wild animals in question. Much like the old divide between ranchers and sheepherders that fueled the plots of Western movies, those who support cattle ranching are at odds with Native Americans, conservationists, park rangers, and others who would like to see the bison roam. When bison cross boundary lines — when they wander outside of Yellowstone National Park for example — they unwittingly morph from protected wildlife to livestock, and can be hunted down and killed. Others are working to domesticate the species, herding them with helicopters and trucks on large industrialized farms, breeding out the genes that kept the animal wild in an attempt to turn bison into an easier to handle meat source.

America is at a critical crossroads in its relationship with the bison. What we decide in terms of the animal's future may hold the answer to many of the other critical resource decisions that must be made about preserving the American West.

To learn more about the film, visit the *Facing the Storm* interactive companion website (<http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/facing-the-storm>), which features detailed information on the film, including an interview with the filmmaker and links and resources pertaining to the film's subject matter. The site also features a Talkback section where viewers can share their ideas and opinions, preview clips of the film, and more.

The Participants, in alphabetical order:

Narcisse Blood, Red Crow Community College, Standoff, Alberta, Canada

Ervin Carlson, member of the Blackfeet Nation and President of the Board of the Inter-Tribal Bison Cooperative

Peter Dratch, Ph.D., National Park Service

Mike Fox, Director, Inter-Tribal Bison Cooperative (ITBC)

Dan Flores, endowed professor of history at the University of Montana, and author of *The Natural West*

Cormac Gates, Ph.D., wildlife biologist, University of Calgary

Mike Hayden, Governor of Kansas, 1987-1991

Hal Herring, author, *Famous Firearms of the Old West*

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Mimi Hillenbrand, 777 Ranch, South Dakota
Drew Isenberg, author, *The Destruction of the Bison*
John Lilburn, wildlife advocate
Thomas Linfield, Montana State veterinarian
Conrad Little Leaf, Fort McLeod, Alberta, Canada
John Mack, Yellowstone National Park
Mary Meagher, Wildlife Biologist, Yellowstone National Park, 1959-1997
Mike Mease, executive director of the Buffalo Field Campaign in West Yellowstone, Montana.
Dan O'Brien, Author, *Buffalo for the Broken Heart*
David Parchen, Montana historian
Frank and Deborah Popper, authors of the original “Buffalo Commons” proposal, which was published in *Planning Magazine* in 1987. They continue to work and speak about bison and Great Plains issues. Frank is a professor at Rutgers University. Deborah is a professor at the College of Staten Island.
Darnell and Smokey Rides At the Door, Blackfeet tribal members and Blackfeet traditionalists from Browning, Montana
Errol Rice, Montana Stockgrowers Association
Jack Rhyan, U.S. Department of Agriculture
DJ Schubert, wildlife biologist
Brian Schweitzer, Governor of Montana
Robert Thomson, naturalist in Montana

About the Filmmakers

Doug Hawes-Davis and **Drury Gunn Carr (Writers/Directors)** co-founded High Plains Films in 1992. Since then, the filmmaking duo has collaborated on nearly 30 documentaries. Their documentary feature, *Libby Montana*, was broadcast nationally on the acclaimed PBS Series, POV, and was nominated for a National Emmy® Award the following year.

Other well-known High Plains Films include *Brave New West*, *Killing Coyote*, *Varmints*, *This is Nowhere*, and *The Naturalist*. Challenging in form and content, their work is intended to provide insight into the relationship between human society and the natural world. Carr and Hawes-Davis also have worked extensively as freelance camera operators, producers, directors, and editors, assisting with documentaries, television, web video, and nonprofit/corporate video production. Hawes-Davis is the founder of the annual Big Sky Documentary Film Festival. Now in its ninth year, the festival is consistently recognized as one of the world’s finest documentary cinema events. Both Carr and Hawes-Davis remain involved in festival programming and development.

Rita Pastore (Executive Producer) is an award-winning producer of regional and national documentaries — many covering critical issues of science, technology, public policy, and human values. She has developed and worked on many film and video projects that have received funding from NEH, NEA, NSF, the United Nations, and many private foundations. She has been an NEH Journalism Fellow and board member, as well as a past-president of Women in Film and Video/New England. Currently, Pastore is a member of the board of the Big Sky Film Institute.

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About *Independent Lens*

Independent Lens is an Emmy® Award-winning weekly series airing on PBS. The acclaimed anthology series features documentaries and a limited number of fiction films united by the creative freedom, artistic achievement, and unflinching visions of their independent producers. *Independent Lens* features unforgettable stories about unique individuals, communities, and moments in history. Presented by the Independent Television Service (ITVS), the series is supported by interactive companion websites and national publicity and community engagement campaigns. *Independent Lens* is jointly curated by ITVS and PBS and is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, a private corporation funded by the American people, with additional funding provided by PBS and the National Endowment for the Arts. The series producer is Lois Vossen.

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