

THE ALASKA LEGISLATURE



*** HONORING ***

*** ROBERT O. STEPHENSON ***

On behalf of the people of Alaska, the members of the Twenty-ninth Alaska Legislature wish to honor Robert O. Stephenson's contribution to restoration of wood bison to Alaska, along with a long and productive career in wildlife research and management. Bob pioneered techniques to integrate the observations, experience, and knowledge of local people (much later labeled as "traditional ecological knowledge") with modern science to understand wildlife ecology and implement sound management decisions.

Prior to Bob's involvement with wood bison, he was an internationally-recognized expert on wolf biology and management. From his earliest experience in researching arctic foxes on St. Lawrence Island as a graduate student, to his unique study of wolf ecology as a participant observer with Nunamiut (inland Inupiat) wolf hunters from Anaktuvuk Pass, to his later role as a management biologist working with the Gwich'in and Koyukon communities of the Yukon Flats, he clearly distinguished himself as a superb communicator with local people of all cultures.

Bob's interest in traditional ecological knowledge and his scientific curiosity led him to the discovery in the early 1990s that sedge meadows and wetland habitats in Alaska were perfectly suited for wood bison, populations of which were already being re-established in similar habitats in Canada. He discovered and documented Athabascan oral histories which contained references to the "the hefty one among timber," a literal translation of one of several Athabascan names for wood bison. Bob gathered bison skulls and bones from Interior and other areas of Alaska and had them properly identified and carbon-dated. These data supported traditional oral history references to wood bison.

Bob recognized many potential benefits of restoring wood bison in Alaska including providing an additional food source for rural and urban hunters that depend on or prefer harvesting wild game for food; restoring a natural ecosystem by returning the large grazer missing from Alaska for 200-300 years; supporting photography and other tourism-related economic activities; and securing a more certain future for this northern subspecies of North American bison.

Bob engaged internationally-known academic and management experts to critically evaluate the past and potential future role of wood bison in Alaska. He became a recognized expert on this subject and was invited to serve on Canada's National Wood Bison Recovery Team. In recent years, he was one of the principle authors of a special U.S. federal rule under the Endangered Species Act that established the legal basis for releasing wood bison into the wild while simultaneously protecting the interests of landowners and other economic interests.

Undaunted by numerous bureaucratic, political, and legal setbacks, Bob worked with a succession of colleagues within and outside of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game to make wild, free-ranging wood bison a reality in Alaska. Bob not only conceived a great idea, but worked tirelessly over two decades to make it happen.

The Twenty-ninth Alaska Legislature commends Robert O. Stephenson for his remarkable efforts and accomplishments. Due to his initiative, wood bison have returned to Alaska as a renewable natural resource that will benefit present and future generations of Alaskans. Thanks to Bob, we can take satisfaction in knowing that wood bison, once on the verge of extinction, are again part of the Alaska landscape.




MIKE CHENAULT
SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE


KEVIN MEYER
PRESIDENT OF THE SENATE


SEN. PETE KELLY
PRIME SPONSOR


SEN. JOHN COGHILL
PRIME SPONSOR

Date: April 7, 2015

Cosponsors: Senators Bishop, Meyer, Costello, Dunleavy, Egan, Ellis, Gardner, Giessel, Hoffman, Huggins, MacKinnon, McGuire, Micciche, Olson, Stedman, Stevens, Stoltze, Wielechowski; Representatives Chenault, Claman, Colver, Drummond, Edgmon, Foster, Gara, Gattis, Gruenberg, Guttenberg, Hawker, Herron, Hughes, Johnson, Josephson, Kawasaki, Keller, Kito, Kreiss-Tomkins, LeDoux, Millett, Muñoz, Nageak, Neuman, Olson, Ortiz, Pruitt, Saddler, Seaton, Stutes, Talerico, Tarr, Thompson, Tilton, Tuck, Vazquez, Wilson, Wool