

The Story of Buffalo Mountain by the Artist [Stewart Steinhauer](#)

There is no condensed version of a Cree story, so either relax and read on, or turn away now. One meaning of the term in the Cree language for “people” refers to a “the four part being”: spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical. Cree stories register on all four levels simultaneously, as any good story can. This story is about a spiritual passageway from our world to some other world we do not know in our waking day-to-day lives, but to which some folks can travel.

And buffalo, too. Funny thing, that. We humans aren’t alone on the planet. Kiyas (quite some time ago), when the last of the great buffalo herd was being hunted to extinction, a few buffalos traveled across time and space to a safe place; a place to wait for the time of returning. At least, that’s what my old people told me, and now I’m telling you.

In fact, before I ever heard about the hole in the mountains where the last of the great buffalo herds retreated to safety, my second mentor, a Cherokee elder who had moved to my region to work in the addictions treatment area (no end of work there), and who took pity on my state of absolute ignorance about “indian stuff”, told me about a dream that visited him one night; it was still quite vivid in his telling.

“You and I were on foot in the mountains, when we came upon a cave. We went in, and could see light way back in the cave...it was a tunnel, not a cave. We went through, and stepped out onto a hillside, overlooking a very broad valley, and there were large herds of buffalo wandering freely everywhere. Below we noticed a tipi village, but, before we could go any further, we were suddenly surrounded by people.

‘How did you get here?’ they asked. ‘People from your side aren’t supposed to be able to get through.’

‘We just walked through’ said the dreamer, pointing to the cave mouth on the hillside behind us. All around there was no sign of what we’ve come to think of as the modern world.

But the modern world was not too far away. In 2000 I was invited to submit a proposal for a playground sculpture that spoke to the notion that we humans are in a relationship with the natural world, and that there are definite consequences to our actions, felt down through the generations. The Call For Proposals asked artists to create a safe, playable playground sculpture that also had an environmental awareness message. I immediately thought of the intentional destruction of a 60 million head herd of buffalo, and the impact, to this day, 140 years later, on the lands and the peoples who once lived in a relationship with those buffalo.

Here was a good environmental message, at least in my humble opinion. It happened to us indigenous Peoples. What if it happened to modern Canadians? I was already following the threat of global warming, the global cancer epidemic, and could see the

coming global wars for oil, then water...the socio-political heirs of the folks who destroyed the buffalo herd now had bigger fish to fry.

My entry was chosen in 2000, commissioned and created in 2001, installed in 2002, and now stands in W.G. "Tubby" Bateman Park in the Strathcona community of Edmonton.. The buffalo portion of the installation is also a small child-sized mountain, and children climb it all of the time. The polished passageway through the "mountain" has been used by both children and adults. Surrounding buffalo mountain is a circle of thirteen stones, for the 13 "moons" in the Cree "earth's journey once around", or, literally, "one earth", as a year is called. A scientist argued with me about choosing thirteen stones; "60% of all years have only 12 full moon cycles in them". I said nothing, but pondered on a way of reasoning that can attempt to completely ignore 40% of reality. We may not have had 13 moons every year, but for those many, many occasions when we did, we at least had names for them.

However, I didn't chose a ring of thirteen stones just because of the thirteen moons in (some) of the years; I chose the visual symbol of the thirteen moons because it points to something that the socio-political forebears of those wise guys who ordered the buffalo herds destroyed tried to destroy centuries earlier. A matri-focal human society. Not matri-lineal, nor matriarchal. No hierarchy, no pecking order, no pyramid stack of bosses with the Big Boss at the top.

Three hundred years after the Jesuit mission to Turtle Island began, Cree society had been fundamentally altered. A "headman" system had been installed, and Christianized headmen lined up to sign a treaty with the British Crown. The wholesale destruction of the buffalo herd was well underway by the time of Treaty Six in 1876.

Waiting. Like the buffalo herd in the safe place through the hole in the mountain. Women at the center, bonded with their Great Mother, the earth, and swayed by their Grandmother Moon. Physical things can be destroyed, but spiritual things cannot be destroyed. Emotional things can be smashed, but they bounce back up. Mental things, ideas, are bullet-proof, and are therefore considered very dangerous by the Big Boss.

Buffalo Mountain is about pain and suffering, loss and grief, despair and agony, seemingly endless. But it is also about hope, re-birth, and the strongest asset we humans have....a very young, fragile and tender child, filled with infinite possibility.

- Stewart Steinbauer