Why was this area of Montana chosen as the home for the American Prairie Reserve’s mission?

This area of northeastern Montana is an ideal location for a large-scale prairie reserve for several reasons. First, big tracts of public land make it possible for us to purchase relatively small amounts of deeded acres in order to glue together a large and fairly seamless landscape. Second, the majority of the land is rare in that it is still untilled native prairie. Third, the area is well known by Montana sportsmen for its wildlife abundance, and scientists have long reported that it is globally important in terms of unique plants and animals.

How would you explain the distrust and animosity that has been reported within the neighboring ranch community?

Change is often not welcome no matter where you go. We have been around for ten years now, but we still represent a new idea and are promoting change as far as how the land will be used. Human beings have used the lands we are acquiring in many different ways for thousands of years. For the past one hundred years or so they have had an agricultural emphasis. Now American Prairie Reserve (APR) comes along and is focused on wildlife and public access, which represents a change from the most recent use which is livestock grazing.

There are also some people who are afraid we are going to “lock up the land.” The fact is that our model includes nearly eighty percent public land that will always be accessible, and a key part of APR’s mission is to open our private lands to public access. Currently we are one of the largest participants in FWP’s Block Management program and one of only a handful of landowners in Montana that have signed ten-year agreements with FWP.

Lastly, some people are convinced we are “kicking people off the land.” In fact sellers typically call us to start the conversation, not vice versa. All are willing and motivated sellers who have a new idea as far as what they want to do with their lives and their business. All of the families who’ve sold to us are still involved in agriculture – and 95% of them still live in the immediate area.

What is the long-term goal for the APR in terms of the desired number of acres under its control?

Our goal is to glue together a wildlife complex of about 3.5 million acres. That number consists of a few million acres of Bureau of Land Management lands, about a million acres of the CMR, which is run by the Fish and Wildlife Service, lots of State land sections, and about 500,000 private acres managed by APR. The acres that will be under APR’s control are only those 500,000 that we will have purchased.
Has APR ever received “surplus” bison from Yellowstone Park? Are there plans to accept them in the future?

To date we have not received any Yellowstone bison. Our understanding is that the first bison to be moved to a new location outside of Yellowstone will go to the Fort Peck and Fort Belknap Reservations. We are certainly open to receiving Yellowstone bison provided they fit our current APR model, which has three important components. First, our model specifies that all animals be certified completely free of all reportable diseases listed by the Montana Department of Livestock. Second, we also require that all of our imported bison undergo genetic tests using the latest testing technology known as SNPs (single nucleotide polymorphisms.) Very few herds in North America – except for Elk Island National Park in Canada where we currently get our imports – have been tested with SNPs and declared free of cattle genes. Third, we require that for the foreseeable future APR bison be registered as livestock with the Montana Department of Livestock so that they can graze on our BLM leased lands.

We assume that at some point, perhaps decades into the future, government policies may change to include managing bison in the same way that elk, big horn sheep, grizzly bears, moose and all other wildlife are managed. In other words, they can pretty much roam where they want in Montana. When and if that happens, we would be pleased to donate our bison to the public as we would no longer have any need to own and manage them ourselves. For now however, we will continue to grow our herd following the requirements listed above.

Currently, there is public hunting allowed on the reserve through Montana’s Block Management Program. Would one consider APR pro-hunting or is it somewhat of a divisive issue within the group? Does it conflict with partners such as the World Wildlife Fund?

APR is pro-hunting. That’s never been a divisive issue within the organization. We consider hunting to be a Montana tradition and a way to stay connected to and enjoy this beautiful landscape. As I said before, we have enrolled most of our deeded properties in the Block Management program under 10-year contracts.

There has never been any conflict with World Wildlife Fund over our stance on providing access for hunting. In fact WWF’s Montana-based employees have been hunting in our project area for the past decade. One
of World Wildlife Fund’s most notable successes for helping to bring all kinds of wildlife back from the brink is in Namibia. A sophisticated, greatly expanded hunting strategy, conceived of by WWF and which has brought hunters from all over the world to Namibia, was at the core of that effort.

Does the APR plan to create any permanent easements that would allow for public hunting access in perpetuity?

APR already has several thousand acres permanently protected under conservation easements held by Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks. However, we are not likely to do any additional, permanent hunting easements going forward. It is our responsibility to ensure the habitat we own is managed for long-term sustainability of wildlife. To meet that responsibility, we must allow flexibility for the people running APR 50 to 100 years into the future. They may, from time to time, need to adjust where hunting is allowed on APR’s privately owned acres. For instance, they may want to close an area for a few years to do a wildlife study, or because wildlife has been decimated in that area due to some kind of die off. We are committed to public hunting, but feel a responsibility to pass that flexibility on to those who come after us.

Does APR have a stance on the current management of the sage grouse?

As an imperiled species, sage grouse need to have their habitat protected. As you know, there is still a lot of sod busting going on in and around our project area, which wrecks sage grouse habitat for good. The good news is that sage grouse habitat and numbers are in pretty good shape in Northeast Montana. APR works with FWP, NRCS, WWF and the BLM on figuring out best management practices for sage grouse related to grazing, hunting and overall management of our properties. We hope that our efforts can contribute to sage grouse numbers remaining strong over time in our area.

What other activities on the Reserve are open to the public?

The Reserve is open to the public for various recreation activities beyond hunting, like hiking, biking, horseback riding, wildlife viewing, photography, and more. We opened our first public campground last year – it will cost you just $12 per night, per campsite for tents and RVs ---and are seeing more and more groups and outfitters come out for trips.

Where did you grow up and what is your background? Do you hunt or fish?

I grew up primarily in Great Falls and eventually went to Bozeman and got a degree from Montana State. I was my dad’s “personal assistant” starting when I was about seven years old while he was a hunter safety instructor in Great Falls for many years. I have every word of those training films memorized! My mom and dad kept a deer and elk camp in the Highwoods throughout most of the 1960s. They later got enamored with the upper Sun River Canyon and Gibson Lake area. We put in our first elk camp in Levitt Creek south of Gibson in 1969. I hunted deer on the Dearborn River in the early and mid-1970s on private land that, sadly, is no longer open to the public. Most years we enjoyed trips out to The Breaks area for pronghorn. These days I do a lot less big game hunting but still enjoy hunting upland birds with my friends and my English Setter/ mutt-cross pointer named Otter.

What is the deal with the Yurts? They look like a neat place to stay.

They are a neat place to stay. They have withstood winds clocked at over 100 mph, although we did lose one once that had not been properly wired down. They are a great low-impact, resilient lodging option on the prairie. The Camp has 6 yurts: 4 sleeping yurts with 2 single beds each, a kitchen yurt for rustic food preparation, and a meeting yurt with common space. We also have a lot of canvas wall tents that we use to expand capacity.

We use the camp for a range of groups for educational, recreational and fundraising purposes. For example, National Geographic’s Student Expeditions programs will stay there twice this summer. Sunset at the yurts is stunning with the Little Rockies in the distance, and there’s a new hiking trail that meanders out into the bison range from camp. Most of the time the camp is used for APR or partner gatherings, but other groups can reserve it by special arrangement.