



## THE 777 BUFFALO RANCH

---

In 1972 Rita and Ray Hillenbrand bought the 777 Ranch, a prairie property located between the Badlands and the Black Hills of western South Dakota. In this area monumental annual migrations of bison herds once occurred between the prairies and the Black Hills. Today it is where the bison that were hunted to the brink of extinction in the 1800's and the land on which they depend on are making a come back. The Hillenbrands ran the ranch as a traditional cattle ranch for a dozen years, and then began a conversion to buffalo after a particularly tough winter and spring of pulling calves made them reconsider.



777 Buffalo Ranch, September 2012

Mimi Hillenbrand, daughter of Rita and Ray, has been involved in land and bison management as well as marketing from an early age. In 1991 she took her first class in Holistic Management™ and has continued her learning partly with the help of her long-term consultant and Savory Institute Accredited Professional, Kirk Gadzia. Her deep knowledge is also influenced by her travels to and observations of wild places on every continent.

Mission Statement of the 777 Buffalo Ranch that informs their Holistic Context™

*"Working towards a sustainable environment that promotes biodiversity, that preserves the integrity of the American Bison and wildlife, and that has a respectful, honest working relationship with the people that work here and the communities they live in."*



Mimi and her beloved Bison.

Mimi's enthusiasm about bison and their place on the land cannot be underestimated. The health of the land is a driving force for her management objectives and permeates all aspects of her enterprises. The theory behind the 777's buffalo management is to do as little as possible to the animals and let the buffalo live as close to a wild condition as possible.

## **WHOLE UNDER MANAGEMENT**

In 2003, Mimi took over ownership and full time management of the 777 Buffalo Ranch. The 777 Buffalo Ranch's decision makers, Mimi Hillenbrand, manager Moritz Espy, ranch employee Chance Gorsuch, and meat employee Rod Slade manage roughly 28,000 acres and 1700 head of bison through 25 paddocks for meat and live animal sales. This area typically gets around 16 inches of precipitation with the majority of this coming in the spring. In the past the 777 Ranch sold both hay and grain finished meat as well as grass-fed. With growing customer awareness the demand for grass-fed has expanded so that 100% of the bison meat is sold in the grass-finished market reducing costs significantly.



Another aspect of the business Mimi is currently developing is the sale of genetically pure bison to other bison producers and conservation organizations.



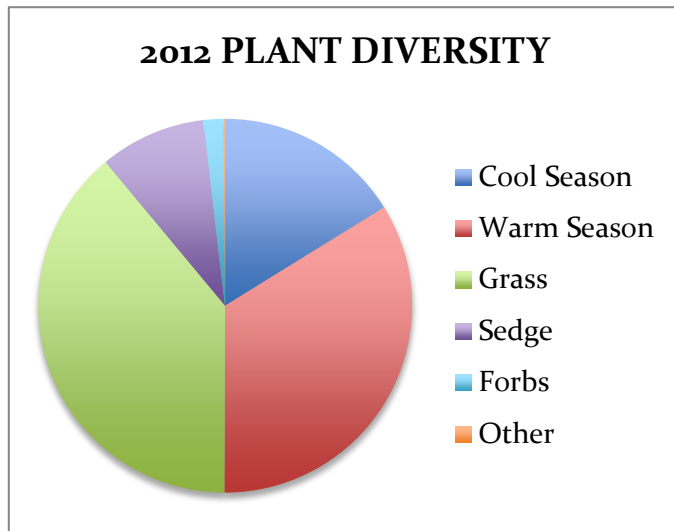
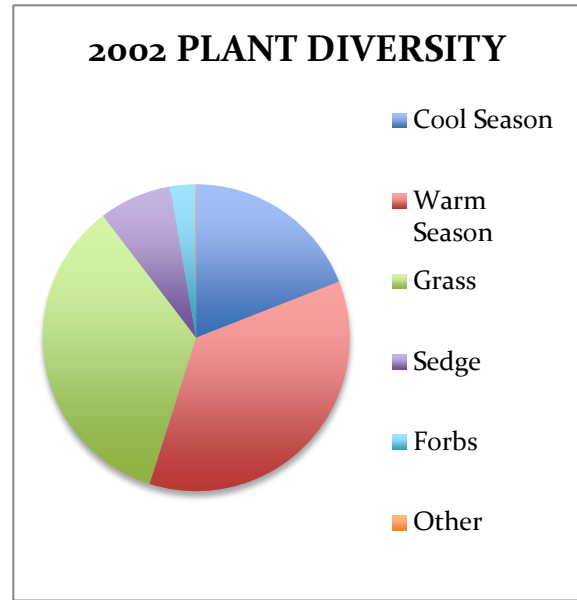
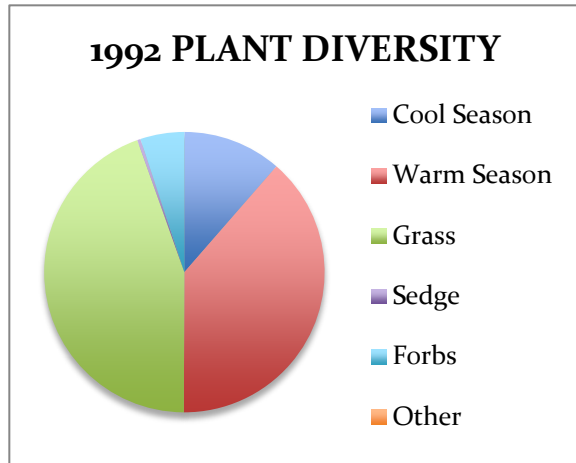
Echinacea, a traditional medicinal herb. Photo by Kirk Gadzia.



Mimi showing Holistic Land Plan and Holistic Grazing Plan. Photo by Kirk Gadzia.

## RESULTS

Using Holistic Management, Mimi has reclaimed the land over the years, bringing back the native vegetation, insects and wildlife that co-existed with the buffalo in days gone by mimicking the predator and prey relationship that once existed. The health and resilience of the 777 Buffalo Ranch is directly related to the abundance and diversity of its plant, insect, bird, microorganisms, and animal species. On the ranch, plant diversity is increasing having many species of native cool and warm season grasses, flowering forbs, shrubs, and trees.



Mimi has spent a significant amount of time in the field observing animal behavior and planning, but her most challenging task has been to make the business profitable. She began by selling more of the marketable animals and aligning forage production to stocking rate. This increased income and began the process of getting the ranch out of debt. She also credits the ranches' progress to her dedicated staff.

On the 777 Ranch deer, elk, antelope, mountain lions, coyotes, bobcats, foxes,

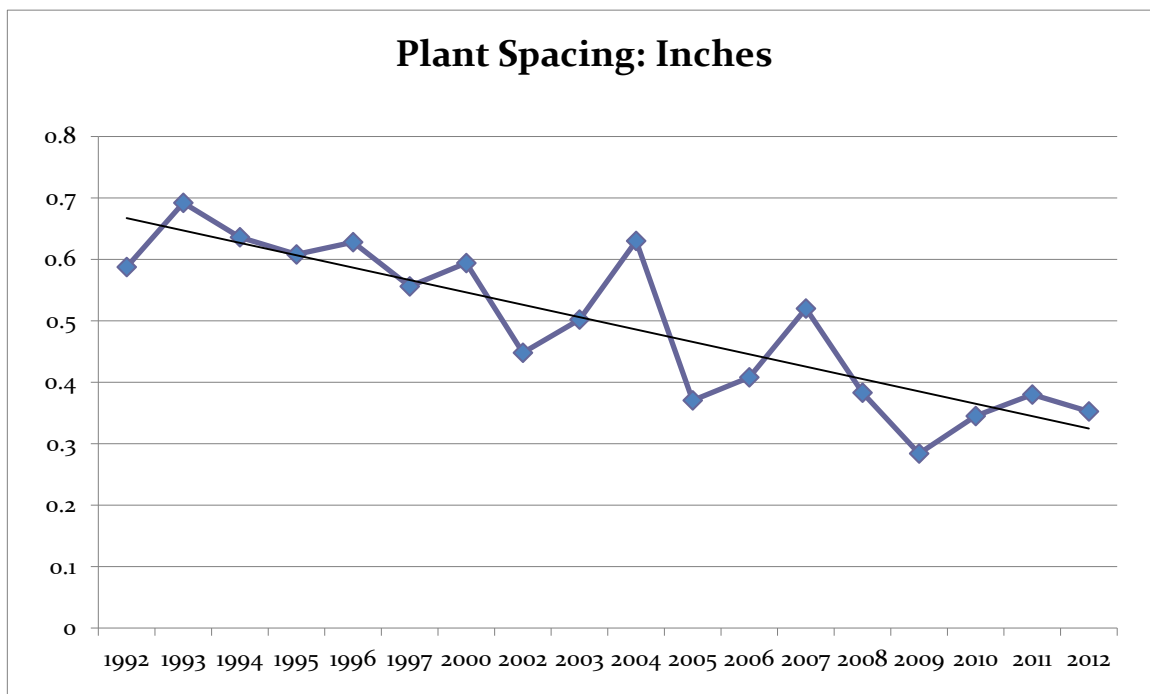
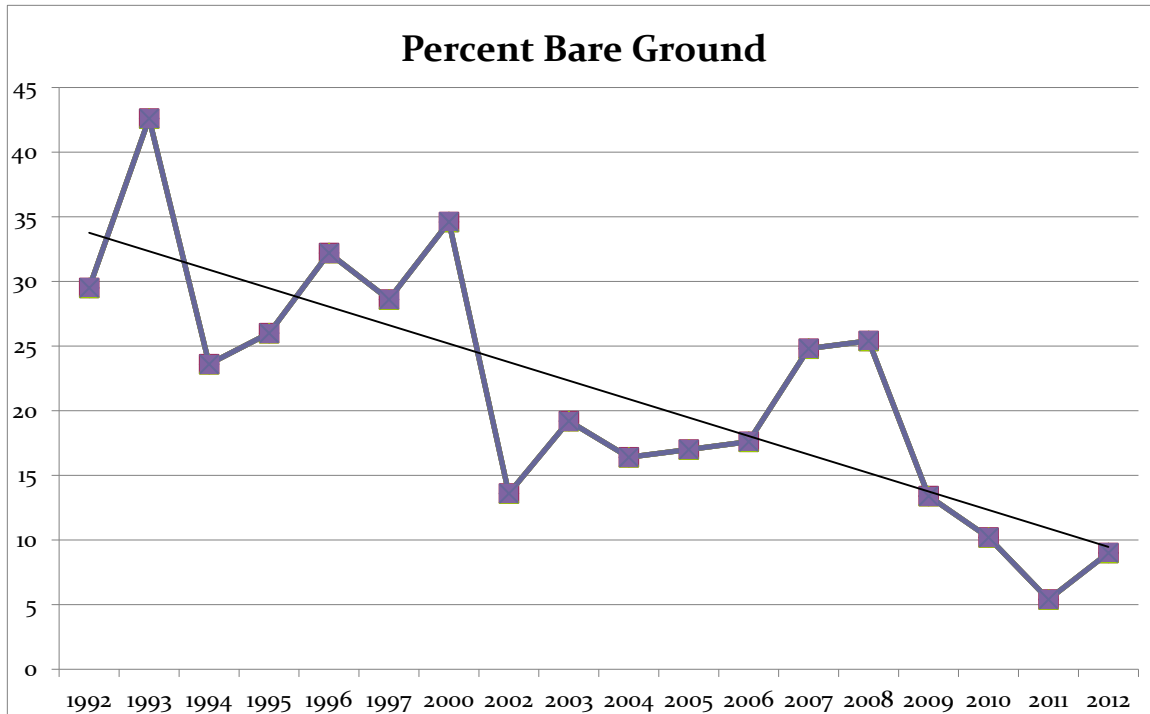
badgers, prairie dogs, porcupines, ground squirrels, and many other animals share the range with the bison as they have for thousands of years. While many traditional ranchers try to control prairie dogs and many conservationists attempt to advance their influence on the landscape, Mimi has largely left prairie-dog management to the buffalo, stating: "Where a cow might break a leg on a prairie dog hole, the buffalo have an almost magical way of smoothing the ground by their very presence." The ranch is also home to a variety of birds and raptors such as golden and bald eagles, red tail hawks, ferruginous hawks, prairie falcons and many others. Rare grassland birds such as the Baird's sparrow and Long-billed curlew are found in abundance.

Each year Mimi helps create a detailed grazing plan for the bison herd that moves between 25 different pastures during the growing and dormant season. In 1992, in conjunction with planned grazing, ecosystem monitoring transects were established

across the ranch and data are collected annually. The data analysis shows a decrease in bare ground and erosion with concurrent increases in species complexity and diversity. The land is improving – becoming more resilient to climate extremes.



Dung beetles burying fresh bison manure. Photo by Kirk Gadzia.



One good measure of the balance being sustained on the 777 Ranch is the increased effectiveness of the water cycle. Twenty years of data shows that there are virtually no signs of erosion present, except in the “badland” areas where soil type prevents plant growth. With nearly all of the precipitation that falls captured in the soil, the ranch is becoming more resistant to the effects of drought. In fact, during many years of below average rainfall the ranch did not have to destock. By implementing Holistic Planned



Grazing™ low production grasses are being replaced by deep-rooted native species like Green Needlegrass and native herbs such as Echinacea, prized for its medicinal qualities, grow in profusion. Hand in hand with increased water cycle effectiveness and increased biological diversity is the health of the mineral cycle, which is illustrated by a profusion of dung beetles.

The 777 Buffalo Ranch is a superb example of how Holistic Management is applicable across different grasslands that vary in amount and timing of precipitation as well as the types of herbivores that are used.