



INISKIM

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An immersive, community experience . . .

The moonlit canopy casts a shadow
on the winding forest path.

In the distance, the drummers call.
We hundred-or-so people have met

for the first time. Now, we travel together in a single line through the darkness, our path lit only by the glow of sleeping buffalo lanterns.

We have left the comfort of our homes. We have left our cell phones behind; we move in silence, giving way to the song of the creatures, trees, and wind. We travel with an open heart on lands older than history, on lands which speak the story of the buffalo and those of the ancestors.

The forest path gives way to an ancient field. We follow the silhouettes of treetops and mountains, like torn paper against an indigo sky. The first stars have come to help tell the story. They have witnessed an eternity; our time is but a day.

This is *Iniskim, Return of the Buffalo*, an immersive puppet-lantern performance. Iniskim . . . sleeping buffalo . . . stone buffalo. The story of human folly,





and of Na'pi, the trickster, who has hidden the buffalo in the mountains. Iniskim is a gathering . . . a teaching. Iniskim shines light and truth upon the land.

A very short history of the buffalo

In early 2017, as part of its mandate to restore species and ecological

processes in national parks, Parks Canada began a reintroduction of plains bison to Banff. Banff is Canada's first National Park located in southern Alberta reaching west of Calgary, along the British Columbia/Alberta border. Iniskim marks this occasion with an immersive, community-engaged, lantern-puppet performance in the style of a traveling medieval cycle play, one that will illuminate upon the rivers and forests of the Canadian Rockies.

The plains bison is a uniquely important animal in the history, culture and ecology of North America. Bison were a plentiful species (historians estimate that there were once 300 million bison roaming from Alaska to Mexico) along the Eastern Slope of the Rockies as far west as the Continental Divide until the late 1800s when they were almost completely eradicated from the land. Many factors contributed to this, including a desire on the part of governments to weaken indigenous populations resisting European expansion westward.

The buffalo were the single most important food source for Indigenous Peoples, and provided all manner of raw material used for everything from shelter to clothing, tools to children's toys.

Banff National Park was central to saving this iconic species from extinction in the late 1880s by convincing the Canadian government to buy the Pablo-Allard herd in Montana and protect the bison on federal lands.



Project Overview

Iniskim is an immersive, outdoor storytelling event which uses lantern sculpture, puppetry, spoken word, and traditional Blackfoot and Stoney songs, dance and drumming.

Community members and visitors are invited to gather in advance for lantern-building workshops where conversations and teachings can take place.

Iniskim aims to create a venue for discussion in the spirit of truth and reconciliation about the North American story, and engage in dialogue about a shared path forward for First Nation and non-First Nation people. The story of the buffalo is the starting point for cultural understanding, and their return is a significant moment pointing toward healing, rejuvenation, and a better way forward. The return of the buffalo is also an important ecological moment — as they teach us of our shared connection to the land, and to the many beautiful facets of nature.



Why Here? Why Now?

The demise of the buffalo is a story for all of North American to contend with. It is a reminder of the interconnectedness of our societies and of humans to the greater environment. It is a story which can teach us about the coarsest instincts of colonialism and the great costs that come with imperialism and unchecked conquest. Our hope is that Iniskim will give a space for discussions about where communities are, and where communities might go. It can create a space for healing and a space for light.



We stand at a crossroads, environmentally. And so, here too, the buffalo is a great teacher. The reintroduction of a *keystone species* such as the buffalo is a positive step for the greater health of the plains ecosystem. Already in Banff, birds which build their nests from the hair of the buffalo have returned to the land where the herd is active, after an absence of more than a century.



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