

# American Cowboy

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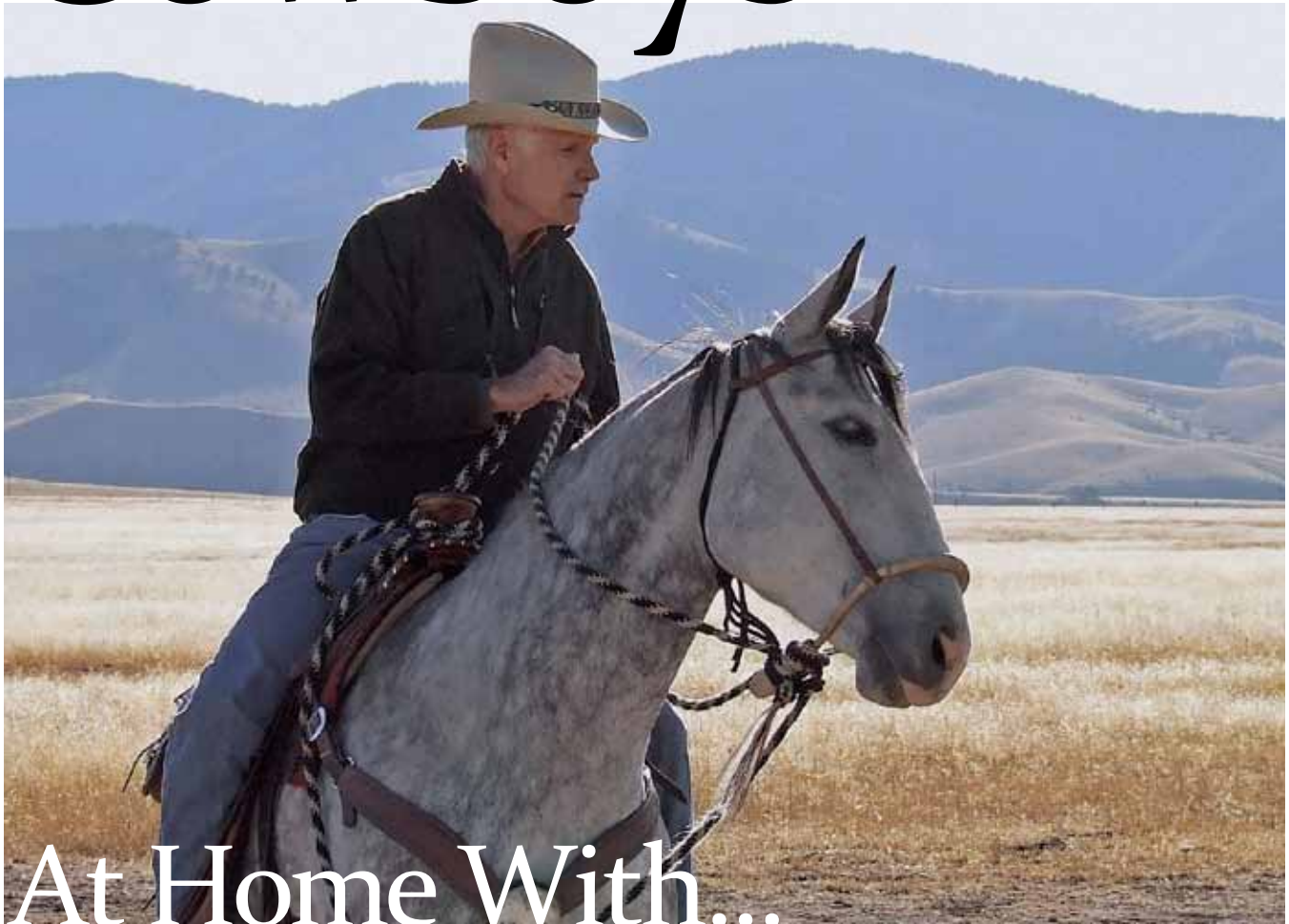
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DISPLAY UNTIL JULY 15, 2010

# Cowboys



## At Home With...

### Ted Turner,

71, is not a cowboy. “I am a bison man,” he says. The famously outspoken media mogul and philanthropist has, in fact, been a driving force behind the resurgence of bison production in the United States. Managing editor **Tom Wilmes** sat down with Turner last January at the National Bison Association’s winter conference in Denver, where Turner was a keynote speaker.

#### WHAT IS IT ABOUT BISON THAT MADE YOU WANT TO PROTECT AND PROMOTE THEM?

When I was a boy, I was really interested in the natural world, and I read all the books that I could get my hands on about birds and wildlife. It seemed so silly to me that the passenger pigeon and the Labrador duck were driven to extinction. People nearly succeeded with the bison, too. In just 100 years, the bison population was decimated from 30 million down

to 100 in the United States.

*Turner bought his first few bison in 1978, shortly after he purchased a parcel of land in South Carolina. “Then I started dreaming about having a ranch out West where I could have maybe 1,000 of them,” he says. Turner bought the 114,000-acre Flying D Ranch in southwestern Montana with some of his first profits from founding the cable news channel CNN. The ranch is one of 13 he currently owns in the U.S. and Argentina.*

**TED TURNER  
ON HIS RANCH,  
SNOWCREST, IN  
ALDER, MONT.**

#### WHAT PROMPTED YOU TO PURCHASE YOUR FIRST FEW BISON?

I was looking for some bison, and somebody knew where there were three that somebody wanted to get rid of, so I bought them. We had three, and then we had five, and then the next year we had only one baby, so we had six. When I bought my first three, there were about 70,000 bison in the world. Today, there are 500,000 worldwide, and about 300,000 in the United States. The thought that we went from three to 52,000 [the size of Turner’s herd today] is just mind-boggling. That’s more than 10 percent of all the bison in the world. That’s a big share to have of a major living creature.

Turner and a partner founded the restaurant chain Ted's Montana Grill in 2002, in large part to create a broader market for bison meat. Today, bison outsells beef at his restaurants by a ratio of nearly two to one.

**YOU OWN THE WORLD'S LARGEST PRIVATE BISON HERD. WHY DO YOU BUY BISON FROM SMALLER PRODUCERS RATHER THAN USE YOUR OWN STOCK EXCLUSIVELY FOR YOUR RESTAURANTS?**

Part of it was that I thought it was the right thing to do. The other reason is that I was thinking ahead. Bison is now selling for twice the price per pound as beef, and it doesn't cost any more to raise bison, hardly, than beef. They eat about the same amount, they're the same size, and take up the same amount of space. I wanted to have the goodwill of the rest of industry in case McDonald's or Arby's, for instance, decides to go into the bison business. And I wanted other bison producers to feel friendly toward me, because I was helping to create a market. I did that with the cable industry, too. I was real nice to people on the way up, because I thought we'd get a lot of competition, which we did. You want to build bridges, not burn them. That way people will say, "We're sticking with Ted."

**WHAT DOES THE FUTURE LOOK LIKE FOR AMERICA'S BISON HERDS?**

I'd like to see them in the majority on the Great Plains, where they evolved—from Canada down to northern Mexico, but mainly in Nebraska, Montana, North and South Dakota, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas. Cattle came from Europe, where it's wetter. If you watch cattle on a hot summer day, they will seek out shade and stay in the riparian zones. But there were no trees out on the Great Plains, or hardly any, and very little water. Bison will just lie down in the grass rather than look for shade, because they're better insulated for hot or cold weather. When they had those winters of 40-below up in Minnesota and North and South Dakota and Montana, the cattle died by the thousands. But bison have all that hair on their front side and not on their backside, and in a big winter storm they'll circle up with their

butts in the center for warmth. Bison are much better adapted for survival on the Great Plains than cattle are.

**WHERE DO YOU ENJOY SPENDING YOUR TIME?**

I don't have one favorite place, but I really like it out on the Rocky Mountain front. I spend probably half the summer in Montana horseback riding and fly-fishing, half the winter in New Mexico quail hunting, and the other half down in north Florida. I go to Argentina in the dead of winter, and I travel a lot otherwise, as well, but those are the main places.

**WHAT BREEDS OF HORSES DO YOU HAVE?**

I have mainly quarter horses out West, and Tennessee Walkers back east. Down in Argentina I have Argentine Ponies—they're real nice. I've got about 100 horses.

**WHAT DO YOU THINK IS THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE FACING AMERICA'S NEXT GENERATION OF LIVESTOCK PRODUCERS?**

Global climate change is the greatest threat. With a human, if your temperature goes up 4 degrees you go to the emergency room. And that's going to be the planet. If it goes up 6 or 7 degrees, it's curtains for everybody. When I was born, there were 2 billion people on earth, now there are 6.8 billion. In 70 years, the human population has increased three and a half times. The natural world cannot keep up with the consumption of so many human beings, and we're still adding 80 million more a year.

**WHAT MAKES YOU HOPEFUL FOR THE FUTURE?**

My book ends on a hopeful note, it says: "Human beings were responsible for the Holocaust and creating nuclear weapons, but we're also the ones who produced the *Mona Lisa* and Beethoven's Fifth Symphony." All we have to do is do the right things—do the smart things, and not do the dumb things—and we'll be fine. And you don't have to be a rocket scientist to figure out what the right and the wrong things are.

*Turner's autobiography, Call Me Ted (Grand Central Publishing, 2008) written with Bill Burke, is out in paperback and audiobook.*



**RANKINGS BY GUEST EDITOR Annie Bianco-Ellett, World Champion Mounted Shooter**

"Real cowboys never line dance—unless they've had way too many Jack and Cokes. They two-step. Also, every cowgirl should have a shotgun or two in her closet. I do!"

**COWBOY**



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GUARDIANS OF THE RANGE



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PAINT BALL



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CHAI TEA

**NOT COWBOY**

▶ Agree or disagree with Annie? Tell us at [AmericanCowboy.com](http://AmericanCowboy.com)