

SAVING A DROWNING BUFFALO OR LETTING NATURE TAKE ITS COURSE

The Logics of Moral Discourse: Prescriptions 155

Last February, in the middle of a cold morning, a bison bull plunged through the ice-covered Yellowstone River near Fishing Bridge in the center of the park and was unable to extricate himself. Water vapor steaming from its nostrils in the crisp air, the 2,000 pound animal struggled in vain, succeeding only in enlarging the hole. About 10:30 a.m. park employee Barbara Seaquist, a member of the Young Adult Conservation Corps, discovered the drowning bison and contacted park headquarters. A park ranger replied that the incident was a natural occurrence, and the bison should be allowed to sink or swim on its own. Meanwhile, several persons who had heard about the struggling beast appeared on the scene to photograph it.

By about 5:00 p.m., as dusk was settling on the bison's struggle for life, a party of nine snowmobilers approached the bridge. After learning from Seaquist that assisting the buffalo was against park policy, one of the snowmobilers, Glenn Nielson, a vice president of Husky Oil Company from Cody, Wyoming, became outraged. He was struck by what appeared to be the callous attitude of the photographers, who were merely filming the incident. "If you're not going to help it," Nielson said, "then why don't you put it out of its misery?"

The snowmobilers left the scene, and after a brief caucus four of them returned, Nielson carrying a sixty-foot orange nylon rope. Seaquist was gone when they returned, so they fashioned a loop, tied it around the animal's horns, and walking gingerly out on the ice, tried to haul the animal to safety. At this point Seaquist returned and repeated her request that nature be allowed to prevail. She also warned the four men that they were endangering their own lives by walking out onto the ice. They ignored her. According to Nielson the bison had almost made it out of the water when the rope broke. "The sad thing," he said, "is that he [the bison] knew we were trying to help. He laid his head at my feet just exhausted." As it grew too dark for the rescuers to see, the attempt was abandoned. The temperature fell to -20°F that night. In the morning the bison was dead, frozen into the ice. Coyotes and ravens soon descended on the animal. When the warmth of spring melted the river and freed the remainder of the carcass, a grizzly bear was observed feeding on the bison downstream. A shred of orange nylon rope was still fastened to its horns.

Upon his return to Cody, Nielson wrote a letter to the right-wing radio

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commentator Paul Harvey, describing what he felt was the Park Service's cruelty. Harvey seized on the dramatic incident and, in three venom-filled broadcasts, tore into the Park Service's policy of nonintervention, calling officials "knee-jerk ecologists." "It is not a scientific question, it is a moral one," Harvey said. "The reason Jesus came to earth was to keep nature from taking its course."¹

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