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BLUE RIDGE'S LAST BUFFALO

WITHOUT A PLAQUE, WOULD WE MISS WHAT WE HAVE NEVER SEEN?
BOB PERKOWITZ - SPECIAL TO THE OBSERVER

My respite from entrepreneurial rigors is bike touring, and in April 2002 I set out to ride the length of the Blue Ridge Parkway. It was in part a training ride for a planned crossing of Australia later in the year, but I also wanted to experience a 470-mile bike ride on a two-lane road through mostly natural areas without stop signs or stop lights.

I rode past numerous highlights along the parkway. The one that struck me as most unusual was a plaque at a roadside rest area by mile marker 374 announcing the death of the last buffalo in the area. Joseph Rice, an early settler, shot and killed the lonely fellow in Bull Creek Valley in 1799. This amazed me for a few reasons.

First, I didn't know that there were ever any buffalo around here. Buffalo belong in the Great Plains, where hunters could shoot them by the dozen while traveling through the area on a stagecoach or steam-powered train. Also, I wondered how they knew he had gotten the last one, and why Rice let it be known that he was the killer. Shouldn't one be a bit more circumspect in trying to finish off a species?

Finally there's the last buffalo himself. Talk about going from bad to worse. One moment you're wandering around wondering where all your friends went. The next you are lying on the ground dying. Legend has it that Rice was attracted to the buffalo's bellowing. Then Rice fired and "The booming mating call ended in a death scream and the huge animal crashed to the ground." In his last moments the old bull might have realized what had happened to all his friends.

It took only a short 50 years or so, from the arrival of the first settlers in the area in the 1750s until when Rice met our hapless friend, to rid our region of buffalo. The cougars that roamed the area shared a similar fate. Luckily for these species, some managed to survive elsewhere. Other local animals, including the ivory-billed woodpecker, the Carolina parakeet and the passenger pigeon, did not fare so well. We will never see any of them alive again anywhere.

Then, a few miles further north along the parkway, I came across a related roadside plaque by Mount Mitchell. This one, put up by the National Park Service, overlooks hillsides of dead trees

and is titled "Forest Decline." It talks about insect problems and airborne pollutants that it calls "acid precipitation." Some trees also face survival challenges.

If you drive or ride along the Blue Ridge Parkway, and miss the plaque at mile marker 374, you might never notice the lack of buffalo. And for the vast majority of the distance, most of the trees seem to be doing just fine. Indeed, the overall experience of a trip along the parkway is one of natural magnificence.

The combination of the natural beauty with the evidence of its vulnerability left me thinking that our last wild places, where animals and trees can exist nearly as they have for millennia, are rare and special places. The only remaining places where we can experience relatively untrammelled natural wilderness is in our state and national parks and forests. We need to respect and protect these treasures.

Spring approaches. In a few weeks the bare trees will turn green. The bears will come out of hibernation. The rivers and waterfalls will flow full with water and fish. Consider a visit to one of those state or national parks and forests. Hike a trail, canoe a river, photograph a waterfall, catch a fish and maybe even set up a tent, camp out for a night and see some stars.

You won't see any buffalo around, but you will find that nature is still out there. It nurtures us, and we need to take care of what we have left.

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Observer community columnist Bob **Perkowitz** of Charlotte is a businessman and environmentalist. Write him c/o The Observer, P.O. Box 30308, Charlotte, NC 28230-0308, or at rperks282@aol.com.