

— TELLURIDE —
MOUNTAINFILM

Duke and the Buffalo



Directed by Alfredo Alcántara & Josh Chertoff

Duke is a cowboy. The “buffalo” are part of the largest conservation herd of bison in the United States. Every year, Duke organizes a roundup to inspect the health of the herd and yield income to sustain the Nature Conservancy-owned ranch where they roam. It turns out that bison aren’t as easily herded as cattle, and a lot of cowboy mettle gets tested every year. Taken right into the action by filmmaker Alfredo Alcántara, we can all be thankful that we’re mounted atop nothing friskier than a theater seat when the thunder of the stampede turns our way.

Discussing the Film:

The following questions are intended to spark discussion and activities related to both the content and storytelling elements of this particular film.

For more information on the filmmakers or to see other tour destinations and films, visit mountainfilm.org.

1. What were some of the most interesting images from *Duke and the Buffalo*? What sights and sounds do you remember the most about the film?
2. Do you think Duke is an interesting central subject for a film? Why or why not?
3. Did the sound in the film bring up any feelings for you while watching it?
4. Write a one-sentence summary of *Duke and the Buffalo* and share it with the class.
5. Do you think this film is more about saving the bison or preserving the rancher/cowboy way of life? Give examples from the film to support your argument.
6. The American bison's natural habitat is the tall grass prairie. Only 1% of our original prairie land remains today. Visit these sites online to learn about prairie, why it's so important and why it's become endangered: <http://www.tallgrass.org/wildlife/>, <http://www.prairies.org/>.

Extensions:

1. **WATCH:** Visit the website of the Zapata Ranch from *Duke and the Buffalo*: <http://www.zranch.org/>.
2. **WATCH:** Visit filmmaker Alfredo Alcántara's website at <http://alfiedp.com/> to view clips of his other film work and to see his still photography. Email him to ask him questions about *Duke and the Buffalo*. Also, watch his award winning film *American Promise* at: <http://www.americanpromise.org/>.
3. **READ:** About the history of the Mendano-Zapata Ranch featured in the film. This brief history tells a story rich with European settlers, Ute Indians and the conflict between its earliest cattle ranchers, The Dickey Brothers, and the Trujillo family: <http://www.zranch.org/index.cfm?id=78c59282-b953-4aa0-bf4ec2b2e24c4d76&history-of-the-ranch.html>.
4. **READ:** Follow along with life on the Zapata Ranch by reading their live blog. There's even a place to leave comments and questions: <http://ranchlandsreview.com/category/zapata-ranch/>.
5. **DO:** Teachers: Plan a visit for your class to the Zapata Ranch, meet Duke in person and take one of their famous bison tours. If you're not near the Zapato ranch, contact the Nature Conservancy to see if there's a bison ranch near you.
<http://www.zranch.org/index.cfm?id=329329eb-80c9-419f-996e51120d3ba7d6&bison-tours.html>

6. **DO:** Teachers: Have your class run a fundraiser to help raise money to protect Midwestern prairie land so that the American bison can once again roam free.

Filmmaker Conversation:

Alfredo Alcántara, co-director of *Duke and the Buffalo*

Where did you get the idea for this film?

Alfredo: I was actually going to a boarding school in Colorado and I met Duke Jr. Every weekend, we would go out to the ranch and every summer, I would do hardcore ranch work. Until I was out there with them, I didn't know how close and connected they were to the land. When Duke partnered with the Nature Conservancy to manage the Mendano-Zapata Ranch, we got to go down and learn how to work with the bison, which was completely different from cattle. From there, Duke started adapting his own philosophy on land management and ranching around managing these bison. So I thought we needed to make a film about this. We were originally going to film it just for the website or something. My buddy Josh, the co-director, went down with me to shoot. Once we shot it, we could see that we had a film with rich material.

What was the filming process like? Talk to me about the role of sound in your film.

Alfredo: In terms of the filming process, it was very run-and-gun at first. It was a two-man crew just trying to keep up with these cowboys and this stampeding herd of bison. We would ride out and Duke would tell us that they were going to bring the bison through this huge pasture. We would wait for hours with the steady-cam and then suddenly see a cloud of dust coming in the distance. Trying to ride alongside a stampede and frame a shot was exciting. Sound-wise, we tried to capture as much wild sound as possible. Our sound designer found a lot of it and was able to use it and amplify it alongside the stampede and the more action-packed scenes. We wanted something that was pretty epic in terms of the music. The soundtrack to *Moneyball* and Terrance Malik's *Tree of Life* were actually really inspiring to us. We hired a composer, Ben Talmi, and talked a lot on the epic open landscape of the west, and trying to convey that.

How real and present was the “danger” that you talk about in the beginning of the film?

Alfredo: The danger is mostly related to horses being overly tired and spent. These guys are going in full runs across prairie landscapes, across ditches, ravines and barbed wire. If the horses are tired, their footing can give way. The bison, like most wild animals, want nothing to do with us. Also, like most wild animals, when you corner it or get it in smaller spaces, that's when it can get dangerous. When managing the bison, they have to go through these metal chutes and you have to be careful to not get trapped between the bison and a gate. When they're out on the prairie, they move like a school of fish. It's really cool. Basically, there are about 50,000 bison in North America that are left in a managed

wilderness like the ranch. Very few bison are actually living out on the prairie like this, with these wild herd dynamics.

How important is finding a character like Duke to film?

Alfredo: Duke is an awesome character because at first glance you see this guy with this huge mustache and hat with a whole cowboy mystique to him. When you hear him talk, he's one of the most eloquent and educated philosophers. He understands that in order to save ranching, he knows he has to converse with people who are not involved with ranching. He knows that is the key to conservation, to attracting interest. He has that multi-layered personality; sometimes he sounds like a person who could be a college professor, and then he gets up on the horse. When you look more into his past, he is a fourth generation rancher. He learned a lot of stuff that you don't ever think about anymore in modern society, but he also studied literature in college.

Is this film about protecting the bison or the cowboy? In a way, both are endangered.

Alfredo: I think that's what is interesting about a story like this. Both the cowboy and the bison find each other at this crossroads and they have to figure out "where are we gonna go?" They are both something that is purely American. They either adapt or become a page in a history book. There was actually a line we cut out where Duke says, "You know, I think I was a bison in another life." That's the answer: they're one and the same.

Do you think the film has had an impact? Do you feel it is successful?

Alfredo: Yeah, I was pretty excited at people's reactions when they saw it. I feel like they connected with the characters and spurred this interest in land and bison conservation. The film at least gives them a glimpse into ranching and land management. Actually, what Duke was always trying to push for is expanding the story of his family, ranching and his philosophy on land management. We were fortunate enough to talk to some folks at the History Channel and we're currently shooting a longer 6-episode miniseries on this. It's our chance to go deeper into all of this. We're set to shoot the last part of the series in November and it will probably air sometime in the spring of 2015.

What piece of advice would you give to a student who wants to get into filmmaking?

Alfredo: Honestly, the most important thing is to pick up the camera and shoot. For someone who wants to shoot documentary film, find patience in shooting. The story always unfolds and you have to be there to capture it organically. Have patience and everything will come.

What's your next project?

Alfredo: There are a few projects. There's that one for the History Channel on Duke. We also just finished a short documentary with my production company here in Brooklyn, which is very different. It delves into the underground world of rooster fighting in Mexico. Being around that world was eye opening and scary. I'm also working on a feature doc about an anthropologist who was one of the first to live with an uncontacted tribe in the Amazon in Venezuela during the 1960s. A lot of people blame him for causing this massive measles epidemic that killed a bunch of the tribe. {Pause} Work doesn't stop. I heard someone say once, "I make money so I can work." I feel the same way. I shoot a lot of boring corporate interviews, so I can tell stories about cowboys in Colorado. {Laughs}