U.S. Native American tribes are trying to restore local species like ferrets and foxes as extinctions increase

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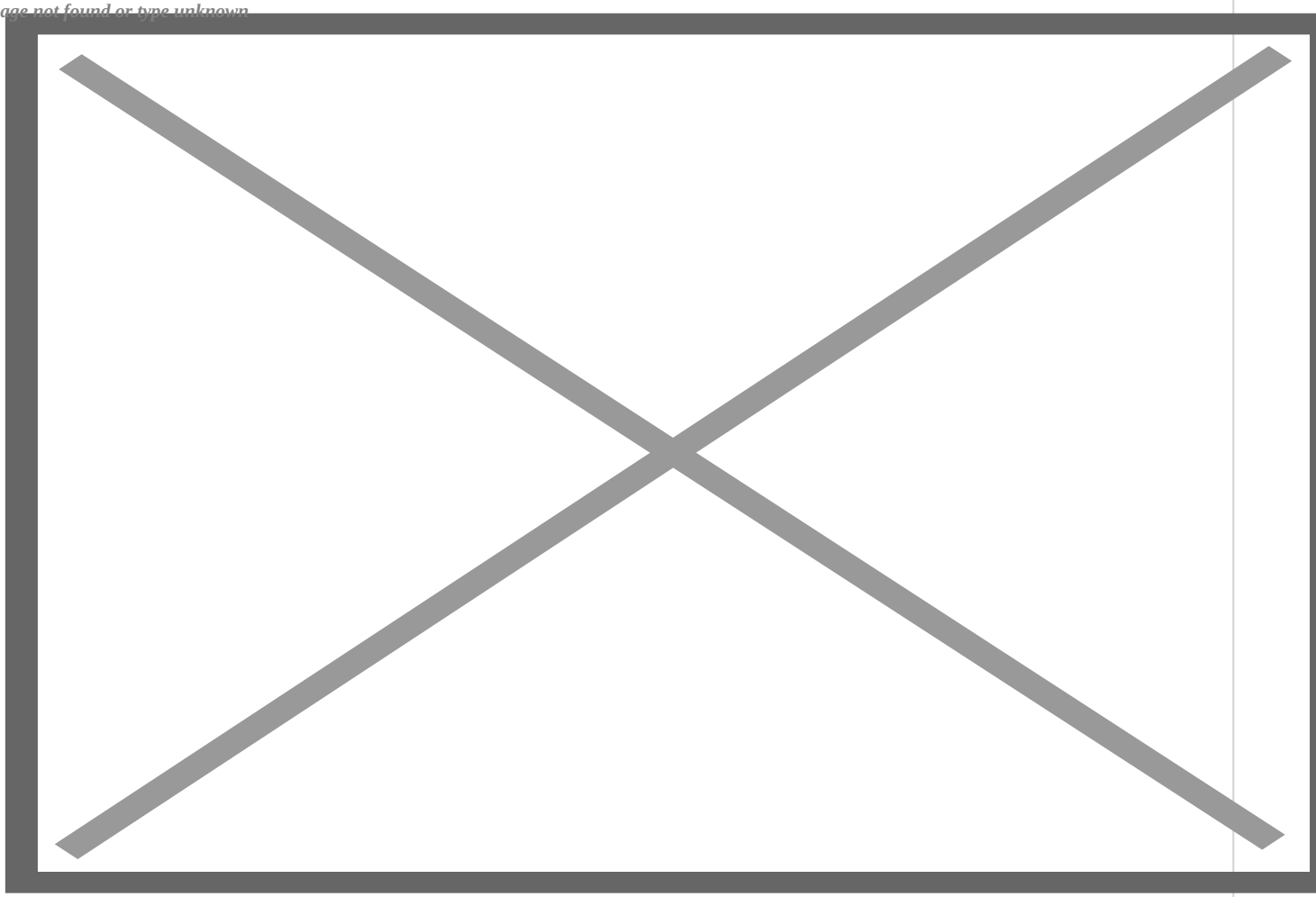

The Fort Belknap Reservation is taking steps to restore native species like the endangered black-footed ferret, seen here receiving a vaccine [Matthew Brown/AP Photo]

Helena, December 11 (RHC)-- Native species such as swift foxes and black-footed ferrets disappeared from the Fort Belknap reservation in the United States generations ago, wiped out by poisoning campaigns, disease and farm ploughs that turned the open prairie into cropland and cattle pastures.

Now, with guidance from Native American elders and outside wildlife groups, students and interns from the tribal college are helping to reintroduce the small predators to the northern Montana reservation, which sprawls across more than 2,600sq km (1,000 square miles) near the U.S.-Canada border.

Sakura Main, a 24-year-old Aaniiih woman who is entering Fort Belknap's Aaniiih Nakoda College in January, is helping to locate and trap the severely endangered ferrets in order to vaccinate them against a deadly plague. Her work is part of a programme overseen by the tribal fish and game department, in partnership with the World Wildlife Fund.

The nocturnal animals live among the mounded burrows of prairie dog colonies, where ferrets stalk the rodents, wrapping themselves around their prey to strangle and kill them. On a recent clear night, with the Nakoda sacred site called Snake Butte looming on the horizon, Main shined a flashlight into a long, skinny wire trap atop a prairie dog burrow. Inside was the second ferret that she would catch that night with fellow wildlife worker CJ Werk, daughter of the former tribal president.

"We got one in there!" Main quietly exclaimed. "Wow, really another one?" replied Werk, who was engaged in a friendly competition with another worker, her cousin, to catch the most ferrets. "I'm going to rub it in."

Hurried back to the "hospital trailer", the animal was sedated and vaccinated against the sylvatic plague carried by their favourite prey. It had a microchip inserted beneath its skin for future tracking, before being released back into the prairie dog colony to a soft cheer from Main and Werk.

As extinctions of animals and plants accelerate around the globe, Native American tribes with limited funding are trying to re-establish imperilled species and restore their habitats, measures that parallel growing calls to "rewild" places by reviving degraded natural systems.

But the direct relationship that Native Americans perceive between people and wildlife differentiates their approach from Western conservationists, who often emphasise "management" of habitat and wildlife that humans have dominion over, said Julie Thorstenson, executive director of the Native American Fish and Wildlife Society.

"Western science looks at humans as kind of external managers of the land and of the ecosystem," she said. "Indigenous people see themselves as part of it." The Nakoda and Aaniiih people who live at Fort Belknap have struggled to restore their land to a wilder state. Disease periodically wipes out ferret populations, and half the foxes released so far may have died or fled.

But tribal members say they're committed to rebuilding native species with deep cultural significance to restore the balance between humans and the natural world. Tribal elders speak nostalgically of the long-gone Swift Fox Society, which prized the secretive animals and used their pelts and tails to adorn hair braids and costumes. They call the foxes and ferrets their "relatives."

"It's like having your family back," said Mike Fox, former director of the Fort Belknap wildlife programme. "We have a pretty darn good spot on the Northern Plains to bring these animals back and just about complete the circle of animals that were originally here."

Prior to European settlement, as many as one million ferrets occupied an estimated 400,000sq km (156,000 square miles) from Canada to Mexico, wherever prairie dogs were found. By the 1960s, the conversion of grasslands to crops, plague and poisoning campaigns reduced the prairie dogs' territory to 5,700sq km (2,200 square miles). Ferrets were presumed extinct, then rediscovered in 1981 on a ranch in

Meeteetse, Wyoming.

They're one of the most endangered mammals in North America, with only about 300 in the wild, including fewer than 40 on Fort Belknap. Populations are propped up with a captive breeding programme to counter periodic decimations by plague.

Prairie dogs are still considered a nuisance among ranchers, including on Fort Belknap, because they eat grass. Prairie dog shooting tournaments once were held annually to raise money for the tribal fish and game department, Fox said. The tournaments are gone on Fort Belknap, and prairie dogs, squirrel-sized rodents common across the U.S. plains, are now recognised as vital to ferrets.

Parts of Fort Belknap also are being repopulated with bison, a species that sustained Native Americans for centuries before white settlers killed them off. Bison are being restored by dozens of tribes across the US, which is similar to efforts in the Pacific Northwest to sustain wild salmon populations, another keystone species that has provided food for tribes.

The work to reestablish black-footed ferrets and swift foxes is different. Unlike bison and salmon, foxes and ferrets aren't food sources. They live in the shadows, hunting mostly at night, and are rarely seen. Ferrets have been reintroduced to seven reservations on the Northern Plains and two tribal sites in the southwest, while swift foxes have been returned to four reservations, said Shaun Grassel, a former biologist for the Lower Brule Sioux Tribe in South Dakota.

Less than 91 meters (100 yards) from a small pen holding three swift foxes about to be released at Fort Belknap, tribal elders Buster Moore and John Allen sat among cactuses and scrubby grasses and passed a pipe around a circle of men, while women sat nearby, watching and listening.

After the ceremony, Moore – whose Nakoda name is Buffalo Bull Horn – rubbed his hands on the hard earth, explaining that they prayed for the foxes, the tribes, and the land itself. "It sustains itself; it helps Mother Earth. Everything sustains balance," Moore said of the restoration work being celebrated that day. "Prairie dogs, wolves, swift fox, red fox, black-footed ferrets."

Once abundant on the plains, swift foxes now occupy about 40 percent of their original habitat. Since 2020, the tribes and college have worked with scientists from the Smithsonian's National Zoo to capture about 100 foxes from healthy populations in Wyoming and Montana and relocate them to Fort Belknap.

As Moore spoke, the reservation's fish and wildlife biologist Tim Vosburgh and two assistants cautiously approached a few foxes in a pen. They used wire cutters to cut through the chain link and pulled it open. After the biologist and assistants moved away, a fox poked its head out of a prairie dog burrow inside the pen. It soon darted out of the opening, followed within minutes by two others. They disappeared across the rolling landscape and into the glaring sun behind the Bearpaw Mountains to the west.

"What they need is a little luck," said Allen the elder. "They need to survive the winter, and then they won't have to worry about it, you know, because they've got all the skills. So we call on our relatives to protect them."

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