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Catalina bison to get birth control

By Kristin S. Agostoni, Staff Writer

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The Catalina Island Conservancy is introducing a contraception plan for its female bison with a vaccine that will control the buffalo population. Bison wait in a holding pens before the vets and scientists can draw DNA samples and give the females the contraceptive vaccine. (Scott Varley/Staff Photographer)

In 1924, a film crew moved 14 bison onto Catalina Island for a movie appearance that never came to be.

Not only were the animals cut out of the silent film, they were left behind on the island's interior, presumably because of cost overruns. The move would leave Catalina with a sizeable herd decades later.

To trim the population that at one point

numbered 600, the conservancy that oversees most of the island has sold buffaloes to an auction house and shipped the animals off to South Dakota Indian reservations.

But now, management of the herd will come from a shot of a contraceptive dart.

The Catalina Island Conservancy today will announce the start of a birth control program among female bison that utilizes a vaccine derived from pig eggs - a management strategy that's said to be cheaper and less stressful for the animals than having them shipped away.

The goal is to reduce the annual growth of the herd from nearly 10 percent to 4 percent, about equal to the annual mortality rate, scientists say. The ideal population would range from 150 to 200 animals, a number that is manageable for the conservancy as it seeks to protect the island's sensitive ecosystems while ensuring the health of its buffalo herd.

"We really are trying to find that balance between protection of the environment, restoration of the environment and the social and cultural values we believe are so important to our lives," said Ann Muscat, the conservancy's president and chief executive

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officer. "And keeping the bison here is something our board found is important to the community."

Muscat described the new birth control program as "the next level of sophistication in the management of the herd."

Having too many of the animals on the island isn't good for the native plants that can get trampled by the bison, nor is it safe for the buffaloes, which have to compete for food.

The contraceptive has been administered for years among deer, elk, wild horse and



Carlos de la Rosa discusses the process of gathering the bison behind him and administering the vaccine and extracting DNA. (Scott Varley/Staff Photographer)

other bison populations. But Catalina's application of the vaccine marks its first use

on a wild buffalo herd, said Dr. Jay Kirkpatrick of the Billings, Mont.-based Science and Conservation Center at ZooMontana, which has been training conservancy scientists since the summer.

On Catalina, scientists plan to administer the so-called porcine zona pellucida vaccine annually to female bison over the age of 2. When injected into the muscle of a female, the vaccine stimulates the animal's immune system to produce antibodies against it.

Those antibodies also attach to sperm receptors on the zona pellucida - a non-cellular membrane that surrounds an egg - and distort the egg's shape.

Fertilization is blocked because the wall of the egg thickens and the sperm can't penetrate it, scientists say.

Kirkpatrick, who has been a consultant on the use of wildlife contraception since 1988, said the PZP vaccine has been given to bison for at least 10 to 15 years.

"We know it works. We know it's safe," he said. "The only difference here is, we've got a semi-free-ranging herd."

On Catalina Island on Thursday, the conservancy's Carlos de la Rosa stood

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beside a set of makeshift corrals at Middle Ranch in the island's interior, where roughly 40 buffalo wandered about, munching on alfalfa. Conservancy workers used the food to lure both males and females into the pens.

Although only females will receive the treatment, both sexes will have blood



Bison drink from a trough in a holding pen prior to their vaccinations. (Scott Varley/Staff Photographer)

drawn, get weighed and receive identifying tags for future research.

De la Rosa, the conservancy's chief conservation and education officer, said most of the females already are pregnant, but that the inoculation won't hurt them or their babies. And because it is not a hormonal vaccine, he said it won't cause them to change their behavior with their male counterparts.

"It's kind of like love without consequences," de la Rosa said.

The process can be reversed by not administering the shot to certain animals in subsequent years, meaning they still will have the opportunity to reproduce.

The conservancy in years past has sold its bison to an auction house, which would ship the animals by barge to the mainland, presumably to be sold and slaughtered.

In response to concerns from animal welfare groups, however, the conservancy abandoned that process several years ago.

In 2003, with the help of the organization In Defense of Animals and Catalina resident Debbie Avellana, the conservancy made plans to send truckloads of bison to a South Dakota reservation, where they would be able to live out their lives.

There have been two other shipments to reservations since then and, depending on the vaccine's effectiveness, the conservancy could continue those partnerships. But most people involved acknowledge there is a downside.

Conservancy officials and animal welfare

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advocates say the process can be taxing for the buffaloes, which are loaded into trucks and shipped away on a barge.

kristin.agostoni@dailybreeze.com

And while the birth control program involves a \$200,000 investment over the next five years, it is cheaper than shipping the bison away when the population swells. Just last month, Muscat said, 150 of the animals were sent to a reservation at a cost of about \$100,000.

At \$24 per dose, the PZP shots will be more cost effective in the long-run than having the animals relocated.

The program comes as welcome news to In Defense of Animals, which wanted the conservancy to manage the bison population in a way that ensures the animals won't be killed.

The organization has agreed to chip in a quarter of the inoculation costs over the five-year period.

Bill Dyer, IDA's Southern California regional director, said the birth control plan has advantages over corralling the buffaloes for a ride to the mainland.

"The expense of it, and the stress it puts on them," he said, "all of that is over now."

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