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Some 50-60 million bison roamed the North American plains before European settlers began displacing indigenous peoples around 1800.

But by 1884 just 325 remained. In less than a century greed, ignorance and power-mongering had all but wiped out the species, depriving future generations of this natural spectacle. An image from the 1870s evidences the slaughter - a massive heap of bison skulls thought to number 180,000 destined to be ground into fertiliser.

Earlier this month I opened the Northern Rockies ISA Chapter Conference with a keynote on the state of modern arboriculture. I later drove to Yellowstone National Park to see bison roaming free like they used to. Farmers and a concerted conservation effort have seen the population rise to 500,000. So the herds are back, offering a glimpse of past magnificence, but I left feeling shame over the mess that our forefathers had left for later generations to sort out.

Britain is widely recognised for its progressive approach to integrating trees into urban renewal and I promote our place-making successes, especially in London and the south, through my international conference presentations. But England has an obvious north/south divide in the standard of street tree management, with the worst examples in our northern cities.

Last week I spoke at another conference, this time in Sheffield, themed "Action for Trees & Woodlands". Top of the topics was street tree mismanagement under the "Streets Ahead" private finance initiative (PFI) contract issued by Sheffield City Council to Amey. Despite Amey's boast to "maximise long-term benefits for the wider community", four years into the contract profit seems the priority, not community benefits.

Contrary to Government guidance, a culture of zero tolerance to surfacing irregularities has resulted in excessive and unnecessary tree losses. Furthermore, there is no credible published protocol for factoring tree value into decision-making - an obvious yet absent requirement.

Sheffield demonstrates that PFI contracts do not necessarily work in the best interests of communities or trees, with good trees being consistently felled for spurious reasons against community wishes. It seems a strange parallel to draw between bison and trees, but I can't help wonder whether 50 years from now our descendants will look back and feel a similar sense of deep shame for the mess that we left them to sort out.

