

Asian lore says 2009 is our year

Province's bison symbol portends good fortune

By Carol Sanders

NEVER mind predictions that this province will weather the recession.

This is going to be Manitoba's year, according to the Chinese lunar calendar.

The year 2009 is the Year of the Ox or Year of the Buffalo, depending on where in Asia you hail from.

"The buffalo is probably the closest thing we in North America can come to an ox," said Winnipeg businessman Ken Wong, a founding director of the Hong Kong Canada Business Association.

"Because of our symbol in Manitoba, we will probably excel," said Wong, who is helping to organize one of Winnipeg's largest Chinese New Year's banquets Jan. 17.

"The Year of the Ox or buffalo means buckle down, (batten) the hatches and work hard," said Wong. According to Chinese lore, the ox and buffalo work hard, patiently and methodically and enjoy helping others.

"Buffalo have those characteristics and look at the people of Manitoba," said Manitoba Chambers of Commerce chairman Graham Starmer. "They're reflective, sturdy, steady and always asking questions. As far as helping, people here lead the nation in charitable giving and helping the poor," said Starmer.

"I think whoever decided to make them Manitoba's symbol made a fabulous choice," said Bill Elliott, CEO at FortWhyte Alive, home to a herd of 30 bison.

On the last day of 2008, with a -34 windchill, the herd wasn't complaining — it was conserving energy.

"When it gets extremely cold, they feel it and lie down," said Elliott. "We found them drifted in and partly covered in snow and quite happy." He



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Bill Elliott says FortWhyte Alive's bison herd is weathering the harsh winter well and have a good year ahead of them.

said 2009 will be fortuitous for the bison herd.

"They're going to have a great year. They're all bred, the cows are gestating and we look forward to another wonderful crop of calves, about a dozen, come May or June," said Elliott.

Starmer's not so sure that 2009 being the Year of the Ox, or Year of the Buffalo, is going to help the rest of the province's fortunes.

"I am not certain that this is going to be 'Manitoba's year' as things are uncertain in the economy," said Starmer.

University of Manitoba economics professor John McCallum agrees.

"For Manitoba to do well, you need good federal transfers, pretty high commodity prices because we've got lots of minerals and grain, a

pretty strong U.S. economy because we've got about 75,000 manufacturing jobs — that's a lot of exports — a pretty high level of consumer confidence, low interest rates, and lots of credit available for things like housing," said McCallum.

"Where we are now, the federal transfers are under pressure with the economy slipping so much, oil prices are down, the U.S. is really slowing down, commodity prices are falling like a stone, but consumer confidence here is still pretty robust."

Elliott said Prairie people have adopted some of the hardy qualities of the bison, like not turning tail when times are tough.

"It faces the storm and lets the wind go across its back and over its thick hide," Elliott said.

"The wind is going to pick up," McCallum warned. "It's time for the lead bison to turn into the wind," he laughed.

Wong is looking for good fortune this year, and will stick to his lunar calendar.

"It's a tradition and it's historically been within the cultural fabric of all Asians," said Wong. This can be an auspicious year for Manitoba, he said.

"We've got to work a little harder toward common objectives — in the Asian world, that's what the ox means. It's part of the family unit, and it provides the muscle tilling the rice fields," said Wong.

carol.sanders@freepress.mb.ca