

University of Calgary

From the Selected Works of M. Scott Taylor

August 8, 2007

American buffalo's near extinction Europe's fault



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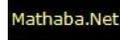
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American buffalo's near extinction Europe's fault

Posted: 2007/08/09
From: Mathaba

It wasn't American hunters who killed the buffalo for its tongue and hide, it wasn't the Native Americans whose hunting methods included forcing buffalos to fall to their death from high cliffs, it was Europeans who drove the animal to the brink of extinction, according to a new study.

Europe's advanced tanning expertise was

the culprit, according to a review of international trade records, diaries and other historical documents conducted by University of Calgary environmental economist M. Scott Taylor.

"The story of the buffalo slaughter is surprisingly not, at bottom, an American one," Taylor said.

In the 16th century, North America was home to an estimated 30 million bison, commonly known as buffalo. By 1889, Wildlife Conservation Society General Director William T. Hornaday counted only 1,091 surviving bison. Although the elimination of the first half of the bison population took more than 100 years, the second half was killed in just 10 years, beginning in 1870.

The cause of the bison's drastic decline has many theories, most of which blame hunters, with support from the U.S. Army, for destroying Native American livelihoods and making room for the railroads. In addition, cattle ranchers are said to have forced bison into smaller habitats.

Previous controversial studies have even pointed the finger at Native Americans.

Taylor says the guilty party sat on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean. The swift bison extermination was a result of an expertise in tanning heavy hides into leather developed in Europe, he wrote in a working paper for the National Bureau of Economic Research earlier this year. The innovation, not practiced in the United States at the time, sustained European's high demand for bison hides.

"These market forces overwhelmed the ability of a young and still expanding nation, just out of a bloody civil war, to carefully steward its natural resources," Taylor said.

About 6 million bison hides were exported from 1871 to 1883. This represents almost 9 million dead bison. The dramatic loss of so many of these animals is one example of how international trade can eliminate resources before a government has time to recognize the value of their natural resources, Taylor said.

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