

University of Calgary

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July 31, 2007

Blame Globalization for the Buffalo's Disappearance



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Aug: 0.00"

Jul: 0.64"

Jun: 0.30"

May: 0.75"

Apr: 2.44"

Mar: 1.55"

Feb: 8.54"

Jan: 2.46"

Dec: 10.41"

Nov: 8.88"

Oct: 0.42"

Sep: 0.03"

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July 31, 2007

Blame Globalization for the Buffalo's Disappearance

After all of these years, we suddenly find out that globalization is the biggest culprit in the disappearance of the buffalo.

... a Canadian researcher has discovered that globalization was the real culprit for the decimation of the U. S. bison herd in the 19th century.

M. Scott Taylor, an economist at the University of Calgary who used international trade records and first-person accounts of

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the hunt, has found that European development of a cheap and easy tanning method after 1870 fuelled that continent's insatiable appetite for bison hides, which could be turned into shoe soles and machinery belts.

"The paper is really about solving a murder mystery and showing that the usual suspects are in fact innocent and that this other suspect-- international trade-- is the guilty party," Prof. Taylor said.

...

The report deflects some blame from the Americans, but it is also instructive for many developing countries that currently rely on resource exports yet are struggling through civil wars. Few have guidelines

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governing resource
use.

"It is somewhat
ironic, that what
must be the saddest
chapter in U.S.
environmental
history was not
written by
Americans; it was
instead, the work of
Europeans," Prof.
Taylor wrote.

By the way, this working paper was
published by the National Bureau
of Economic Research, where
"Sixteen of the 31 American Nobel
Prize winners in Economics and six
of the past Chairmen of the
President's Council of Economic
Advisers have been researchers."

Prof. Taylor, who is
also Canada Research
Chair in
International, Energy
and Environmental
Economics, recalled
that his interest was
first piqued while
watching a movie
that depicted the
bison slaughter for
robes. He compared
the number of dead

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bison to the number of Americans who could possibly need coats. The figures, he said, didn't make sense.

He started to look through export figures, something other historians and researchers struggled to interpret or dismissed in favour of other attractive explanations.

The U.S. Army and government attempts to eliminate the bison in order to control the natives is well documented, and has been likened to a genocide.

"It would be a great step forward in the civilization of the Indians and the preservation of peace on the [frontier] if there was not a buffalo in existence," Texas Senator James Throckmorton once said.

The market for robes, blankets and meat, as well as the ease of picking off animals from trains for sport, did contribute to the steady demise. So did drought, environmental change and new native hunting methods.

Many a North American beaver pelt ended up as hats and furs in Europe (previous blog [here](#)). Many a buffalo hide was converted into leather machine belts for American and especially European factories in the 1870s to help satisfy the booming demand for consumer goods. Also note that by 1870, most of the feral Spanish cattle in Argentina had been hunted out, which caused Europe to look for a new supplier of fine leathers. The westward extension of our railroad network better connected the buffalo supply to Atlantic trade routes.

But, the bulk of the species was wiped out in the U.S. in just one decade--

between the 1870s and 1880s-- immediately after the foreign tanning innovation, according to Prof. Taylor.

Hides sold for between 75 cents and \$3.50 (U.S.) during that period, and about six million were exported (millions more bison were killed) as European armies were being refitted with bison leather, which was found to be tougher than cattle hides.

The U.S. government, fresh from its bloody civil war, did little to protect its natural resources and fell to the whims of market demand.

Despite how this article portrays it, Taylor certainly isn't the first person to notice that the European demand for buffalo hides helped nearly drive the species into extinction. A key theme of Taylor's work is that international

trade can drive the unsustainable harvesting of resources. Weak or non-existent property rights and the claiming of previously unowned resources (like the buffalo) contribute to this.

July 31, 2007 in The Environment | Permalink

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