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# European hide trade blamed for bison's end

Michel Compte



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**Globalization spurred the 19th- century near-demise of the North American wild buffalo, says a new study that partly deflects blame for this ecological disaster from Americans to Europeans.**

Michel Comte

*Thursday, August 02, 2007*

Globalization spurred the 19th- century near-demise of the North American wild buffalo, says a new study that partly deflects blame for this ecological disaster from Americans to Europeans.

An estimated 30 million to 75 million buffalo (or bison) once roamed the Great Plains of North America, from Canada to Mexico, but only a few hundred remained by the end of the 19th century.

The bulk of the species was wiped out in the United States in a single decade - from 1870 to 1880.

"Globalization doomed the buffalo," Scott Taylor, study author and economist at the University of Calgary in western Canada, said. "What caused this punctuated slaughter was world demand for industrial leather."

His study was recently published by the Cambridge, Massachusetts- based National Bureau of Economic Research.

In the 57-page report, Taylor writes: "It is somewhat ironic that what must be the saddest chapter in US environmental history was not written by Americans; it was instead the work of Europeans."

Prescribed theories blamed the near-extinction of the buffalo on the destruction of their habitat as settlers moved westward, over-hunting by aboriginals equipped with new rifles, and a US Army slaughter designed to break American Indians' will to resist assimilation.

But Taylor insists it is more likely Europeans' insatiable demand for hides, combined with the introduction of innovative tanning methods in Europe after 1870, were behind the massive cull, not "greedy American hunters."

There simply was not enough domestic demand for buffalo hides in the United States during that period and a flood of supply should have precipitated a drop in price, which should have mitigated the kill-off, he explained.

Buffalo hides were too tough for American tanners to work with then, but Europeans had developed a way to turn them into leather goods.

Reviewing 19th century international trade statistics, Taylor found that about six million buffalo hides - a significant portion of the kill - had indeed been exported to European countries from 1870 to 1880.

The hides were used primarily in France, Britain and Germany for industrial belting and shoe leather, selling for between 75 US cents and US\$3.50 each.

"In the absence of international trade and new tanning methods, the buffalo population would have (still) declined slowly over the next half decade," Taylor said.

The buffalo population has climbed back to about 500,000 in North America today. AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

