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The Collapse of the Bison: Resolving the Debate

by

Roy Williams

Under the Direction of John McMillian, Ph.D.

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the 19th century collapse of the bison populations of North America. It discusses three prevalent (and occasionally overlapping) intellectual perspectives regarding the collapse of the bison: 1) the “Native American” perspective, 2) the environmental perspective, and 3) the market perspective. A careful analysis of each school of thought, and the primary and secondary sources upon which they rely, suggest that the collapse of the bison was due to multiple causes. A chief reason that bison nearly went extinct in North America during the 19th century, however, is that the introduction of market capitalism to the Great Plains transformed the environment, and helped incentivize nomadic Native Americans to participate in the bison’s near destruction.

INDEX WORDS: Bison, Great Plains, Environmental History, Native American History, Buffalo, Gilded Age

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2023

The Collapse of the Bison: Resolving the Debate

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my Lord and savior Jesus Christ, my wonderful wife Brittany, and my loving family. I also dedicate this thesis to the ceiling I fell through in Winnemucca, Nevada which began my journey to pursue history as a career.

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There are multiple people throughout my life that have led me to this point. First, I want to thank my parents who encouraged me to learn as much as possible. I thank my mother and father for establishing my love of history. Thank you, for all the museum and national park trips over the years which taught me to appreciate the field of history. I thank my wife for always standing beside me and encouraging me to embark on this difficult yet rewarding path.

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1 INTRODUCTION

How did the North American bison come to virtual extinction over the course of the 19th century? Estimates of the bison population at the beginning of the 19th century range from anywhere between 30 million and 100 million, but by the beginning of the 20th century, the entire North American bison population stood at less than just 1,000.

This thesis will examine the persuasiveness of three schools of thought concerning the destruction of the bison, which emerge from a range of disciplines, including. Environmental history, Native American history, Western history, Military history, Technological history, and Economic history. While each field provides insights that help us understand the proximate causes of the bison's destruction, the power of market forces, which incentivized in the overhunting and commodifying of the bison, and the United States government's disinterest in protecting the animals, were especially significant factors.

When examining the background for the destruction of the bison, both environmental and eyewitness population estimates stand as crucial. One of the earliest Anglo American estimates of the bison population of North America is found in the writings of the famed explorers Meriwether Lewis and William Clarke, in their expedition to chart out the territories of the Louisiana Purchase. Lewis detailed the extent of bison populations in what is now North Dakota, writing, "I ascended to the top of the cut bluff this morning, from whence I had a most delightful view of the country, the whole of which except the valley formed by the Missouri is void of timber or underbrush, exposing to the first glance of the spectator immense herds of buffalo, elk, deer,

antelopes feeding in one common and boundless pasture.”¹Later, trappers and hunters recalled seeing giant herds of bison. Pioneer journalist George Wilkins Kendall recounted a story from a Great Plains trapper, declaring that he has “Stood upon a high roll of the prairie frequently, where there was neither tree nor bush to obstruct the vision in any direction, and has seen these animals darkening the plains at every hand.”²

Native Americans of the Great Plains likewise observed the seemingly infinite nature of the bison. Shepard Krech details this bison mythology among the Native people of the Great Plains. “The Cheyenne, Arapahoe, and other Indians firmly believed that the buffalo were produced in countless numbers in a country under the ground,” he wrote. Native Americans believed “that every spring the surplus swarmed, like bees from a hive, out of great cave-like openings to this country.”³

How did the bison of North America, which both Anglo Americans and Native Americans believed would exist in perpetuity, come to virtual extinction? Perhaps an answer can be found by surveying the historical debate of the bison’s depopulation, and understanding 1) the complexities of government inaction regarding the bison, 2) the volatile nature of the Great Plains environment, and most importantly 3) the chaotic nature of market capitalism during the 19th century.

Three broad fields of thought have offered different explanations for the bison’s near-demise. “Native American perspectives” – that is, arguments that have been put forth by scholars who hold generally favorable views of Indigenous People, and who are often of Native ancestry⁴

¹ Lewis, Meriwether, William Clark, Jonathan Carver, and Alexander Mackenzie. *The Travels of Capts. Lewis & Clarke*. (Philadelphia: Hubbard Lester, 1809).

² George, Kendall, “Recollections of the Time when Buffaloes Darkened the Western Plains,” William F Cody Archive, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Access Date 6/21/2023, <https://codyarchive.org/texts/wfc.nsp00868.html>.

³ Shepard Krech, *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History* (New York, New York: W.W. Norton, 2001).

⁴ I do not, of course, mean to essentialize. Native Americans scholars do not all think alike. But I have noticed certain commonalities of outlook and purpose among the scholars I have examined here.

-- tend to argue that the bison were destroyed intentionally, due to Euro American colonial expansion. In their view, military and economic imperialism worked in tandem to destroy the bison, which stood as the primary source of Great Plains nomadic survival.⁵This argument places great weight on 1) Native American testimonies, 2) the overexploitation of the bison through unrestricted market capitalism, 3) the mass hunting of Euro American hide hunters, 4) and the words of United States military figures, such as General William Tecumseh Sherman, and General Phillip Sheridan. The Native American perspective tends to place considerable blame upon the United States government, and its industry, for intentionally destroying the bison to make way for Euro American expansion.

The environmental perspective argues that the bison of the Great Plains were destroyed by a multitude of factors but stresses the volatile nature of the Great Plains environment.⁶ Andrew Isenberg, in his book *The Destruction of the Bison*, holds that a combination of human-induced changes, ushered in by both Euro American and Native Americans, put unsustainable stress on bison populations. Meanwhile, the environmental changes wrought by humans were magnified by the capricious nature of the Great Plains environment. From this perspective, droughts, diseases, and decreases in grazeable land due to increases of European horses and cattle all contributed significantly to the bison's demise.

The market perspective argues that the bison's destruction is best attributed to the unchecked nature of market capitalism in the Great Plains.⁷ This argument intersects with both the Native American and environmental arguments, but details the complicated nature of how Euro

⁵ Valerius Geist, *Buffalo Nation* (Stillwater, MN: Voyageur Press, 1996).

⁶ Andrew C Isenberg, *The Destruction of the Bison: An Environmental History, 1750-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

⁷ Dan L Flores, *American Serengeti: The Last Big Animals of the Great Plains* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2017).

Americans and Native Americans both hunted the bison to near-extinction for the simple reason that, for a time, it was profitable to do so. With the expansion of the railroads and steamboats, increasing industrial demand for leather, and the rise of the bison market as a means for accumulating wealth, the bison were drastically overharvested. Put another way, blame for the destruction of the bison cannot be simply assigned to intentional United States policy in exterminating the bison. The chief factor leading to the bison's near extinction can be traced to market forces.

2 CHAPTER ONE: THE NATIVE AMERICAN PERSPECTIVE

The collapse of the bison populations of North America can be difficult to understand, due to the multiple and occasionally overlapping perspectives that different groups of scholars hold. As I have mentioned above, Native American perspectives assert that it was the intentional policy of the United States government to destroy the bison, in order to designed to end the independence of the Great Plains nomadic tribes, and advance Euro American western colonization.

This perspective is flawed in that it equates the entirety of Euro American and Native American interactions within a predestined narrative of the conquerors and the conquered. While there are numerous examples of interactions between Euro Americans and Native Americans that fit this narrative of imperialism, the story of the bison is more complicated. The complexity rests on the larger trends of westward expansion resulting in the end of Great Plains nomadic freedom, and the ascendancy of the bison market which both Euro Americans and Native Americans participated in. The final point of intersection that can help us understand the Native American perspective is the fact that the bison were both economically and culturally significant animals. This connection between the economic and cultural aspects of the bison is essential to the Native American perspective regarding the bison's collapse.

The Native American perspective may overstress the credibility of the testimonies of Native American leaders, as well as remarks that have been attributed, speciously, to United States military and government officials. Drawing from these testimonies, a field of scholars have claimed that the destruction of the bison was an intentional (albeit unspoken) United States policy. Valerius Geist, a Canadian biologist and bison scholar, says this explicitly. Geist asserts that “the

extermination of the bison was an unspoken national policy of the United States government, and the hide and tongue hunters mere instruments of that policy.”⁸ Statements by individuals such as General Sheridan, and General Sherman, have lent credence to view; it is true that some in the American military leaders saw the bison as an impediment to progress.

General Sherman recounted in his memoirs the desire to eradicate the bison herds of the plains and replace them with cattle. Sherman stated, “this was another potent agency in producing the result we enjoy to-day, in having in so short a time replaced the wild buffaloes by more numerous herds of tame cattle, and by substituting for the useless Indians the intelligent owners of productive farms and cattle-ranches.”⁹ General Sherman spoke disdainfully of Great Plains Indians; he hoped to “civilize” them, so they would resemble Native tribes of the East. furthermore, in his later years, Sherman spoke of the ultimate eradication of the buffalo, blaming economic progress and destiny for their demise, rather than his own actions in the Indian Wars, Sherman wrote, “the Indian Peace Commission of 1867-68 did prepare the way for the great Pacific Railroads, which, for better or worse, have settled the fate of the buffalo and Indian forever”¹⁰

No individual has been cited more frequently, to support the Native American perspective, than General Phillip Sheridan. A general in the US Army, and the architect of the Indian Wars of the late 19th century, Sheridan is popularly credited with both the phrase, “The only good Indian is a dead Indian.” It is therefore not surprising that he is often regarded as one of the driving forces in the intentional destruction of the bison.

⁸ Valerius Geist, *Buffalo Nation* (Stillwater, MN: Voyageur Press, 1996).

⁹ William T Sherman and Willis Fletcher Johnson, *Memoirs of Gen. William T. Sherman* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1891).

¹⁰ William T Sherman and Willis Fletcher Johnson, *Memoirs of Gen. William T. Sherman* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1891).

The reality of General Sheridan's actions and attitudes toward the bison, however, are more complicated than some scholars think. Exaggerated claims about General Sheridan's role in the destruction of the bison stems from a historical myth that has been repeated to the point of becoming historical apocrypha. In 1907, a hide hunter by the name of John Cooke published a memoir detailing a story in which Sheridan appeared before the Texas legislature to protest a bill designed to outlaw hide hunting, and regulate bison hunting, in order to protect the species. General Sheridan is thought to have called for the deliberate destruction of the bison, in order to force the Native Americans of the Great Plains into submission, Sheridan declared,

These men [buffalo hunters] have done more in the last two years, and will do in the next year, more to settle the vexed Indian question than the entire regular Army has done in the last thirty years. They are destroying the Indians' commissary; it is well known that an army losing its base of supplies is placed at a great disadvantage. For the sake of lasting peace, let them kill, skin, and sell until the buffaloes are exterminated. Then your prairies can be covered with speckled cattle and festive cowboy, who follows the hunter as a second forerunner of an advanced civilization.¹¹

According to noted historian Dan Flores, however, Sheridan did not make this statement, at least as it has been narrated. Flores tartly observed that no member of the Texas legislature ever introduced a bill to regulate bison hunting, "There is no evidence the nineteenth-century Texas legislature ever considered a bill to outlaw or regulate the hide hunt," he wrote.¹² Nevertheless, the myth that General Sheridan was a main architect of the bison's destruction has persisted. General Sheridan remains a complex character. While he certainly made his disdain for Native Americans, abundantly clear, he did not wish to see bison become extinct. In fact, he once dispatched troops to Yellowstone and ordered them to protect the few remaining bison there from poachers. While

¹¹ Mari Sandoz, *The Buffalo Hunters* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska, 1978).

¹² Dan L. Flores, *American Serengeti: The Last Big Animals of the Great Plains* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2017).

Yellowstone was established as a National Park in 1872 by President Grant, there was no funding for the protection of its resources. General Sheridan believed the park should be preserved, and he requested funding to protect it from illegal hunting and development. Without proper funding the park remained undefended, however, Sheridan dispatched troops in 1886 to serve as proto park rangers in the defense of the park from poachers and illegal development.¹³

Historian Andrew Isenberg has likewise argued that the destruction of the bison was intentional United States policy, saying, “the eradication of bison from the Great Plains was not unforeseen, but purposeful. In order to pacify the Plains Indians, the federal government sought to exterminate the buffalo.”¹⁴ Isenberg’s argument hinges on the 1874 congressional legislation of H.R. 921, a resolution designed to protect some remaining bison from being harvested. While the bill passed in both the House of Representatives and Senate, it died on President Grant’s desk. Scholar Valerius Geist also details this failed legislation as evidence of complicity in the destruction of the bison, arguing, “President Grant was not about to approve legislation that flew in the face of the policy his fellow officers and friends had been implementing for over five years.”¹⁵ The problem with these assertion from Isenberg and Geist is that they fail to take into account the complexity of the congressional situation.

Congressman Fort of Illinois introduced the bill with the goal of stopping the early extermination of the bison, recognizing that bison were “killed every year in utter wantonness without any object whatever except to destroy them.”¹⁶ The fact that H.R. 921 passed in the House

¹³ Dave Kindy, “How Buffalo Bill and a Civil War general saved Yellowstone National Park,” *The Washington Post*, March, 6, 2022.

¹⁴ Isenberg, Andrew C. “Toward a Policy of Destruction: Buffaloes, Law, and the Market, 1803-83.” *Great Plains Quarterly* 12, no. 4 (1992): 227–41. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23531659>.

¹⁵ Valerius Geist, *Buffalo Nation* (Stillwater, MN: Voyageur Press, 1996).

¹⁶ *Protection of Buffalo*, HR 921, 43rd Cong., 1st Sess., *Congressional Record*, Pt.3: 2104-2109.

with a tally of 132 ayes and the nays remaining uncounted¹⁷, shows that there was ample interest in protecting the bison from the onslaught of illegal hide hunters. H.R. 921 was designed to protect bison and give favorable hunting rights to Native Americans, stating, “That it shall hereafter be unlawful for any person who is not an Indian to kill, wound, or in any manner destroy any female buffalo, of any age.”¹⁸The resolution was not without its critics however, Isenberg quotes Congressman Omar Conger, from Michigan, who viewed the legislation as useless in the face of the march of civilization, Conger proclaimed “there is no law that Congress can pass that will prevent the buffalo from disappearing before the march of civilization.”¹⁹ The situation regarding the overharvesting of the bison of the Great Plains was undeniably complex. While Native American scholars tend to reject the market perspective – which held that both Euro Americans and Native Americans overharvested the bison for monetary gain – it remains the case that bison were being overharvested in staggering numbers.

According to Pekka Hamalainen, an environmental historian, at the peak of hide and tongue hunting on the southern Plains between 1790 and 1840, Native Americans of the Great Plains on average killed around 100,000 bison per year for survival. Hamalainen adds that in addition to the estimated 100,000 bison harvested by Native Americans, the bison herds were diminished by about 525,000 due to nonhuman causes such as animal predation, disease, and environmental factors. In the 1870s, Hamalainen argues, the bison population became borderline unsustainable, “White professional hunters eliminated about 3.5 million animals during the slaughter” of that decade, he writes.²⁰ While the estimates provided by Hamalainen certainly describe the unsustainable nature

¹⁷ *Protection of Buffalo*, HR 921, 43rd Cong., 1st Sess., *Congressional Record*, Pt.3: 2104-2109.

¹⁸ *Protection of Buffalo*, HR 921, 43rd Cong., 1st Sess., *Congressional Record*, Pt.3: 2104-2109.

¹⁹ Isenberg, Andrew C. “Toward a Policy of Destruction: Buffaloes, Law, and the Market, 1803-83.” *Great Plains Quarterly* 12, no. 4 (1992): 227–41. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23531659>.

²⁰ Hamalainen, Pekka. “The First Phase of Destruction: Killing the Southern Plains Buffalo, 1790-1840.” *Great Plains Quarterly* 21, no. 2 (2001): 101–14. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23533186>.

of Great Plains bison hunting, they overemphasize the dramatic Euro American hide hunters of the Southern Plains at the expense of the market hunters of the Northern Plains which consisted of both Euro Americans and Native Americans as detailed by scholars such as Andrew Isenberg.²¹

The Native American perspective stubbornly rejects the notion that Native Americans participated in the destruction of the bison in pursuit of profits. One of the most prominent voices in the field is Vine Deloria Jr., a Standing Rock Sioux scholar who has published many works regarding Native American History and political activism. He dismisses the notion that commercially-minded Native Americans overharvested bison as both ahistorical and preposterous. Deloria passionately describes his rejection of new scholarship which points to Native American involvement in market hunting, arguing, “the Indians did not make any appreciable dent in buffalo numbers in the Northern Plains. It's anti-Indian stuff.”²² While it is understandable for Deloria to take umbrage with scholarship that he thinks is tinged with anti-Indian bias, a careful review of evidence and data suggests that he is mistaken.

While critiquing Native American perspectives, it is useful to understand the bison's intersectional nature. The bison were economically necessary to Great Plains Native Americans, who likewise regarded them as culturally and spiritually significant animals. Some Native American simply rejected the possibility that the bison had become extinct. Others, noting that the bison population had dwindled, placed blame on white settlers. Jeffrey Ostler, a historian of the American West, describes this reaction from the Sioux leader Red Cloud, who said, “When whites first came, we fed and clothed them. But more whites poured into our country. They began to

²¹ Andrew C Isenberg, *The Destruction of the Bison: An Environmental History, 1750-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

²² Jim Robbins, “Historians Revisit Slaughter on the Plains,” *The New York Times*, November, 16, 1999.

divide up our land and tell us what part they would give us. They killed off the buffalo and brought starvation upon us and our children.”²³

While this opinion clearly blames Euro Americans for the bison’s destruction, Ostler is careful to remind us that in some respects, Native Americans tended to agree with Euro Americans about the bison economically as a resource, but differed regarding its spiritual and cultural significance. Ostler describes the concept of “wakan” among the Sioux in describing the destruction of the bison. Wakan is best translated to English as “incomprehensible.” While Native Americans such as the Sioux did blame Euro Americans for the depletion of the bison, they also held, as a matter of spiritual faith, that the bison could be regenerated from the earth.

Ostler says this belief was widely held among main Native Americans of the Great Plains. These Indians believed that bison were both tangible and intangible, and thus capable of regeneration, regardless of how aggressively they were hunted., According to Ostler, Native Americans believed that when “scarcity occurred, it was because the buffalo had returned to the earth, their place of origin, because they had been offended by whites or Indians themselves. A corollary of these distinctively Native ideas about cause and effect was that buffalo were capable of being regenerated.”²⁴

This displays a Native American attitude of universality and permanence regarding nature. When analyzing this concept, it is important to understand how a resource such as the bison of North America could be both culturally and spiritually significant to Native Americans of the Great

²³ Jeffrey Ostler, “They Regard Their Passing as Wakan”: Interpreting Western Sioux Explanations for The Bison’s Decline, *Western Historical Quarterly*, Volume 30, Issue 4, Winter 1999, Pages 475–497, <https://doi.org/10.2307/971423>

²⁴ Jeffrey Ostler, “They Regard Their Passing as Wakan”: Interpreting Western Sioux Explanations for The Bison’s Decline, *Western Historical Quarterly*, Volume 30, Issue 4, Winter 1999, Pages 475–497, <https://doi.org/10.2307/971423>

Plains, yet also be taken for granted as an economic resource that would always exist. Shepard Krech explores this concept in his book *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History*.²⁵ Krech deconstructs the modern mythology regarding Native Americans as never wasteful regarding hunting practices. This idealized depiction of Native Americans – which, incidentally, can be seen in romantic films such as *Dances Like Wolves* -- fails to understand the complexities of Native American life and their interactions with nature.²⁶ The idea that Native Americans lived as ecologists and conservationists, in harmony with the forces of nature, may seem soothing or appealing, but it is not accurate. Shepard Krech succinctly makes this case; he says that stereotyping Native Americans in a manner that hinders honest research that seeks to understand their experiences and interactions with nature.

Krech addresses this complexity when discussing the deeply-held belief of Native Americans that bison returned from the earth infinitely. According to Krech, “Plains Indian ecological spaces would not be within the parameters of a western ecologist’s ecosystem. It is easy to see how a belief of this nature would not encourage conservation or management of a declining resource.”²⁷ Krech’s analysis of the complex nature of Native American thought regarding the bison does not deny that Native Americans held the creatures to be culturally and spiritually significant, stressing, however, that their beliefs did not lend themselves to sustainable hunting practices.

It is equally important to understand Euro American conceptions of the bison. The famous painting “American Progress,” by John Gast, provides an insightful look at some Euro American

²⁵ Shepard Krech, *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History* (New York, New York: W.W. Norton, 2001).

²⁶ *Dances with Wolves*, directed by Kevin Costner (1990; Los Angeles, CA: Orion Pictures, 1990), DVD.

²⁷ Shepard Krech, *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History* (New York, New York: W.W. Norton, 2001).

attitudes toward the bison and the political currents of Manifest Destiny.²⁸ “American Progress” didactically portrays the expansion of the railroads and telegraph lines across the Great Plains, followed by a litany of Euro American settlers and stagecoaches marching forward with the light of the sun at their back. In the direction of their march, Native Americans and bison are shown retreating into darkness at the oncoming advance of Euro American colonization. This painting shows a significant undercurrent of Euro American thought in support for the concept of Manifest Destiny and westward expansion across the continent.

In conclusions, Native American perspectives tend to hold that the US government intentionally destroyed the bison. These perspectives also stress that Indians thought that bison could be regenerated. A significant problem with this point of view, however, is that it places enormous weight on the false notion that General Sheridan forcefully advocating the U.S. government should intentionally destroy the bison as a way of harming Native Americans.

Granted, the calamity that befell the bison of North America was traumatic event for the native people who had relied on them for generations. Still, it is essential to understand that the US government’s failure to protect the bison did not necessarily arise from governmental policy. Above all, the conclusion that can be rendered from a close interrogation of the Native American perspective is that the United States government’s stance toward the bison was neglectful; it was a policy of inaction, until it was nearly too late. Whether this inaction was malicious, or merely incompetent, remains up for debate. But scholars have failed to produce conclusive evidence that the US government intentionally sought to destroy the bison. Their arguments rest on disproven historical myths.

²⁸ John Gast, *American Progress*, 1872, Oil on Canvas, 1872, Brooklyn, New York, Autry Museum of the American West.

3 CHAPTER TWO: THE ENVIRONMENTAL PERSPECTIVE

The environmental perspective regarding the destruction of the bison provides another insightful analysis of the human and nonhuman interactions that led to the collapse of the bison of the Great Plains. Rather than presenting a monocausal explanation for the bison's collapse, the environmental perspective suggests that a host of factors – including droughts, disease, the loss of grazeable land, and the introduction of nonnative species – combined with Euro American expansion, and market capitalism, to bring the bison to virtual extinction. There is little doubt that environmental historians have identified some important factors that contributed to the bison's demise. The problem with this perspective, however, is that it overemphasizes the volatile nature of the Great Plains environment, and places insufficient attention to the devastating nature of market capitalism.

Andrew Isenberg's *Destruction of the Bison* provides arguably one of the most significant explanations of the environmental perspective; it is nuanced and multicausal. Isenberg's analysis of the Great Plains describes such a complex network of interactions between the human and nonhuman world that it is difficult to separate purely environmental and anthropogenic causes of the bison's destruction, due to their inherent interconnections. For instance, many of the interactions that hastened the bison demise arise from the introduction of the horse to the Americas. Horses, when they were brought to the continent, led to destabilizing changes to Native American culture, and to the Great Plains environment.

With the introduction of the horse, many tribes that were largely agriculturalist transitioned to nomadic societies; in the process, they became wholly dependent on horses (for their mobility) as well as the bison (for food and resources). Most Great Plains natives that are currently associated with the traditions of both mounted bison hunting and nomadism migrated

to the Plains during the 18th century from the Rocky Mountains and eastern woodlands. They migrated westward for many reasons, but mostly in order to avoid European diseases and preserve their autonomy.

The introduction of the horse as a form of technology helps us to understand the genesis of nomadism, as well as environmental changes wrought by the interactions between different species. While the story of bison's collapse in North America is unique, the change from agriculturist societies to nomadic societies due to the introduction of the horse has analogues throughout the world. Pastoral nomadism existed in both Eurasia as well as in South America during different times as reactions to both ecological and technological changes. The Puelches, Tehuelches, and Querandí people of South America made the transition to mounted nomadism in the 18th century in a very similar manner to Great Plains tribes.²⁹ The adaptation of the tribes of South America to nomadism had negligible environmental effects, but the changes in North America significantly impacted the bison populations of the Great Plains.

As Native Americans in the Great Plains became nomadic, and more dependent upon the bison, opportunities also arose for them to be reckless and wasteful as they hunted and killed the animals, sometimes for the purposes of trade. Some scholars, such as J Donald Hughes, have advanced a romanticized version of Native Americans, attempting to characterize their societies as ecologically-minded.³⁰ But this sentimental interpretation mischaracterizes the interactions between Native Americans and the nonhuman natural world. Native Americans, like anyone else, can be environmentally conscious, or not, depending on the circumstances. They are not inherently eco-friendly.

²⁹ Ronald E Gregson, "The Importance of the Horse in Indian Cultures of Lowland South America," *Ethnohistory*, 16 (Winter 1969), 33-50

³⁰ J. Donald Hughes, *American Indian Ecology* (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1983)

For instance, the researcher Shepard Krech has detailed the relatively wasteful hunting practices of some Native Americans, who became more effective once they learned to hunt on horseback.³¹ Native American hunting techniques that preceded the adaptation of the horse generally resulted in some waste, but overall waste was increased with the efficiency of horseback hunting. These hunting techniques often involved scaring a bison herd to run off a tall hill, so they would die when they hit the ground (or at least be so wounded that the hunters could easily finish the job of killing them). This style of hunting was effective and innovative, but does not exactly lend credence to the notion that Native Americans practiced sustainability as they harvested bison. Many bison that were killed in this manner were “wasted.” Native Americans simply could not utilize all the animals they killed. One of the most significant archeological sites regarding these forms of mass killing hunts is Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump, a world heritage site in Alberta, Canada, which was named by the Blackfoot people, and which reveals that this hunting practice was used for 5,500 years. While the practice of hunting bison in this manner did not result in the destruction of the bison, it is important to analyze these hunting practices as objectively as possible, without projecting romantic sentiments, derived from the environmental movement, onto Native Americans. Like others who have hunted, Native Americans sometimes wasted kills, and this practice was exacerbated by the added efficiency of horseback hunting as tribes became nomadic.

One of the environmental perspective’s most important contributions to the study of the bison’s destruction can be seen in its revised estimates of the bison’s population. Nowadays, it is believed that anywhere from 30 million to 100 million bison once occupied North America. Previous historical estimates, however, are now thought to have been highly inaccurate. The

³¹ Shepard Krech, *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History* (New York, New York: W.W. Norton, 2001).

earliest estimates came from explorers and naturalists who witnessed herds of bison so massive that they would darken the landscape for miles. In 1871, while travelling along the Arkansas river, Colonel Richard Irving Dodge recounted that “the whole country appeared one mass of buffalo.”³² Other estimates, such as those deduced by Robert Wright, and General Phillip Sheridan, placed the population far in excess of 100 million.³³

These early estimates were flawed due to their reliance upon individual sightings, and the fact that bison only congregate in large numbers during the summer months. Isenberg details this flaw in detail while providing a counter perspective. According to Isenberg, these estimates “failed to consider that enormous herds congregated only during the summer months for the rutting season. During the summer, the short grasses were at their thickest and could support large aggregations of bison. During the winter, the herds dispersed into small groups to search for forage and shelter from the elements.”³⁴ If these initial population estimates are largely inaccurate, then how can we determine the accuracy of contemporary estimates of the bison population of the Great Plains?

Much of the contemporary debate regarding population estimates did not originate with firsthand accounts alone; it also arose from the work of Ernest Thompson Seton, whose 1929 *Lives of Game Animals* provided the groundwork for the contemporary debate. Seton estimated that the bison population had to be 75 million or more based on the agricultural census of 1900, which counted 24 million horses and cattle along with six million sheep within the Great Plains bison habitat. Seton understood that animals lived more prolifically in the wild than in

³² Richard J. Dodge, *The Plains of North America and Their Inhabitants* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1989)

³³ Robert M. Wright, *Dodge City: The Cowboy Capital* (Wichita: Wichita Eagle Press, 1913)

³⁴ Andrew C Isenberg, *The Destruction of the Bison: An Environmental History, 1750-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

domestication. He added that the bison were everywhere on the continent of North America, but did not recognize the extent of natural factors that caused bison to perish, such as drought, disease, and predation.³⁵

By overestimating the number of bison in North America, Seton also led scholars to inflate the size of the bison population's collapse in the 19th century. From Seton's estimates, other naturalists attempted to craft unique arguments to advance the notion that there were more bison in the Great Plains than its environment could likely sustain. For example, Frank Gilbert Roe argued that Seton's estimates were too low due to the prolific natural rate of increase among the bison herds.³⁶ The debate continued; another environmental scholar, Tom McHugh, who observed the bison in Yellowstone, estimated that one bison could be sustained on 25 acres (or 26 bison per square mile).³⁷ Dan Flores argued that 30 million bison roamed the Great Plains.³⁸ In understanding the carrying capacity of the Great Plains environment an estimate of 30 million bison stands as significant when understanding the baseline that the lands could support. This baseline in bison populations also helps us to understand how additional disruptions could affect the bison populations of the Great Plains

In order to arrive at these population estimates, one must begin to understand the environmental factors that helped determine the numbers of bison on the Great Plains. First, a general understanding of pre-Columbian factors, such as predation, droughts, and natural thinning of the herds, is essential before considering the massive changes brought on by Euro American and Native American interactions with the environment. Predation of the bison herds

³⁵ Ernest Thompson Seton, *Lives of Game Animals* (New York: Doubleday, 1929), vol. 3

³⁶ Frank Gilbert Roe, *The North American Buffalo: A Critical Study of the Species in Its Wild State* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1951)

³⁷ Tom, McHugh, *The Time of the Buffalo* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1972)

³⁸ Dan Flores, "Bison Ecology and Bison Diplomacy: The Southern Plains from 1800 to 1850," *Journal of American History*, 78 (September 1991)

by wolves was another cause of the bison's fluctuating population. Flores estimates that as many as 1/3 of young bison calves were killed due to wolves already lowering the natural rate of increase below the threshold of a one-to-one replacement.³⁹

Other factors determining the bison's population included the volatility of the arid climate in the Great Plains. Isenberg argues that the prevalence of droughts, and their impact upon the shortgrass of the Plains, caused significant fluctuations in the bison population. Analysis of previous droughts, which is done by examining changes in tree rings, shows that rainfall and droughts caused massive population fluctuations.⁴⁰ Droughts, which affected the vegetation of the Plains, diminished the environment's capacity to support the bison. Naturalists, who analyzed sites on the southern Plains where Native Americans drove bison to their deaths by getting them to jump off hills, discovered multiple periods during which bison were not killed. These absences -- between 6000 BC and 2500 BC, and between 500 and 1300 AD -- point to an absence of bison due to prolonged droughts in tandem with the tree ring records.⁴¹ These natural population fluctuations were exacerbated with the new addition of horses and cattle, which competed with bison for grazing land as well as for water.

When considering the interaction of the human and nonhuman world, it is useful to understand the tendencies of nature. While previous interpretations of nature have hinged on a belief in equilibrium, recent research has pointed toward a more chaotic reality.⁴² This concept of equilibrium or balance of nature ruled as the prevailing theory regarding human interactions with

³⁹ Dan Flores, "Bison Ecology and Bison Diplomacy: The Southern Plains from 1800 to 1850," *Journal of American History*, 78 (September 1991)

⁴⁰ Harry E. Weakly, "A Tree-Ring Record of Precipitation in Western Nebraska," *Journal of Forestry*, 41 (November 1943)

⁴¹ Tom D. Dillehay, "Late Quaternary Bison Population Changes in the Southern Plains," *Plains Anthropologist*, 19 (August 1974)

⁴² Donald Worster, "The Ecology of Order and Chaos," in *The Wealth of Nature: Environmental History and the Ecological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 156-170

nature until the 20th century. Originating in antiquity from multiple philosophers such as Herodotus, and Cicero, the theory of balance of nature argues that the interaction of species tends towards self-regulation and equilibrium and that humans have no place in attempting to intervene. The Great Plains environment, which the bison ranged upon for thousands of years, exemplifies the chaotic nature of diverse ecosystems. The romanticist movement attempted to craft a narrative suggesting that nature tended toward constant equilibrium and static existence. This notion, while appealing to some, is at odds with the newer, but less aesthetically pleasing model of nature, which points to a process that is constantly in turmoil. Rather, bison and Native American populations were constantly in flux as Native societies constantly made and remade themselves in a dynamic interaction with nature that never remained in stasis.⁴³

As this chapter has shown, the bison population of North America was dynamic and ever changing. Due to the forces of predation, drought, or overharvesting, the bison herds of North America often fluctuated.⁴⁴ The introduction of horses and cattle to North America meant that bison had competition for necessary water and forage. Meanwhile, horses led Native American societies of the Great Plains to become nomadic, which meant they were completely dependent upon the bison. These factors, and the rise of the Great Plains bison market, led to the mass slaughter of bison.

The environmental perspective provides an important analysis of both the baseline of bison population throughout the Great Plains, as well as the changes brought on by the interaction of Euro American and Native Americans with the environment. This perspective

⁴³ Geoff Cunfer, *Bison and People on the North American Great Plains: A Deep Environmental History* (Texas: Texas A&M University Press, 2016)

⁴⁴ Michael E. Soule, *Viable Populations for Conservation Biology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

helps explain the chaotic nature of arid environments on animal populations and undermines previously held beliefs about nature's equilibrium.

One of the largest factors that led to the destruction of the bison stemmed from attitudes of natural equilibrium that were held by Euro Americans and Native Americans alike. How could a resource such as the bison, which once existed in such vast numbers, collapse into virtual extinction? The environmental perspective helps us to understand inherent chaos of nature, but its insistence upon the primacy of environmental factors leaves multiple questions unanswered. It is true that when Native American societies became nomadic, they put bison in greater peril. But bison had already survived tenuous relationships with the environment, the bison population had fluctuated and rebounded for thousands of years throughout North America without coming to collapse. The environmental perspective provides the framework for understanding the perilous position of the bison herds in relation to changing interactions between humans and nature, but it does not account for the final fury of market capitalism which drove the species to near extinction. While the bison were able to withstand the forces of environmental factors, and natural human predation, they could not withstand the final additional factor of chaos, market capitalism.

4 CHAPTER THREE: THE MARKET PERSPECTIVE

As Great Plains Native American societies became less agricultural-based, and more nomadic, they became dependent upon the bison and the horse. The tribes increased mobility also helped make them adept hunters. As Euro American traders introduced capitalism to the Great Plains, Native Americans stood to profit, largely by utilizing their skills as mounted bison hunters to serve market demands by the early 1820s, steamboats began to travel farther north along the Missouri River in search on new untapped resources. These steamboats brought the seeds of capitalism to the Great Plains and degraded the rivers that bison utilized for water. Steamboats devastated riverbank ecosystems due to deforestation around the banks and caused air and water pollution. The steamboats were environmentally impactful because they contributed to deforestation, since one of the main things they transported was timber.⁴⁵ The American Fur Company reached the Yellowstone River by 1832 and soon began to develop trading relationships with the nomadic people of the northern Plains.⁴⁶ As this trading relationship deepened, the Euro American market turned to Native Americans for their ability to hunt bison in massive numbers, and Native Americans aggressively attacked the bison herds in return for considerable profits.

Over the course of the 19th century, North America experienced unprecedented deforestation because of multiple factors. Timber products such as charcoal and lumber were essential and were harvested intensely in the unregulated market. The 19th century saw a massive population increase which demanded clear land for both housing and agriculture, also

⁴⁵ Michael Williams, *Americans and Their Forests: An Historical Geography* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 149-157

⁴⁶ Louis Hunter, *Steamboats on the Western Rivers: An Economic and Technological History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1949), 47-49

resulting in deforestation.⁴⁷ In addition to these factors, disease such as the chestnut blight *Diaporthe Parasitica* caused the functional extinction of the American Chestnut tree.⁴⁸ At the turn of the century, however, calls for conservation resulted in the Forest Reserve Act of 1891, beginning the process of forest conservation. While forest conservation throughout the United States has been a relative success story, the causes of deforestation such as unregulated market capitalism, settler population growth, and disease follow a similar and intertwined trajectory to the North American bison.

By the 1840s many nomadic societies had adopted elements of market capitalism and began trading bison robes with Euro Americans. This meant that far more bison were killed beyond the 0.5 million bison hunted annually for nomadic subsistence. As this economic relationship continued the demand for bison robes and meat increased exponentially. Additionally, as nomadic societies became consumeristic, they became more wasteful, and increasingly pursued alcohol and other commodities. In 1830, Edwin Thompson Denig and George Catlin witnessed a Sioux bison hunt of massive proportions. As they recounted, the Sioux hunting party slaughtered nearly 1500 bison simply for the meat from their tongues. (The rest of the carcass was left to rot.) Catlin details how this hunting party then proceeded to trade these procured bison tongues for “but a few gallons of whiskey, which was soon demolished.”⁴⁹ Even if they may be exaggerating, this story sheds light on a changing nomadic culture that began embracing elements of consumerism at the expense of the natural world.

⁴⁷ Douglas W. MacCleery, *American Forests: A History of Resiliency and Recovery*. (Durham, NC: Forest History Society, 2011)

⁴⁸ George H Hepting, “Death of the American Chestnut.” *Journal of Forest History* 18, no. 3 (1974): 61–67. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3983346>.

⁴⁹ George Catlin, *North American Indians*. (London: Penguin Classics, 2004). vol. 1, 289.

The role of alcohol in the bison's destruction should not be skipped over lightly. As trading relationships between Euro Americans and Native Americans societies increased on the Great Plains, bison boom towns began to appear with ample supplies of alcohol and other goods for native hunters. Fur company trading posts provided alcohol, ammunition, and sold supplies to nomadic hunters on credit, often at oppressive rates, to ensure bison robes and tongues were always in supply. Francis Parkman details the one-sided dealings that occurred at Fort Laramie between Euro American traders and native hunters. Parkman declared, "The prices are most extortionate, a common clay pipe sells for half a dollar, a three-bit calico shirt for four dollars a pair of the very coarsest pantaloons for ten dollars, and a gallon of whiskey for thirty five dollars."⁵⁰ It is not difficult to infer how extortionate prices coupled with consumerism, and intensified bison hunting, could drive nomadic societies to slaughter bison for the purposes of monetary gain. In addition to the extortion experienced by native hunters in utilizing these trader stores and fur company outposts, natives sold bison pelts for about three dollars worth of goods per robe. Upon purchase, these traders would sell the robes for ten to fifteen dollars to be processed for leather and clothing in the eastern United States as well as Europe.⁵¹ This relationship kept the prices of procuring bison robes and meat low with a relatively high profit margin for Euro American traders.

The American Fur Company sought to keep the prices of bison robes low to ensure a high rate of volume and trade regarding bison harvests. Ramsey Crooks, an agent of the American Fur Company, details this drive to keep prices low, declaring that, "A higher price might be obtained, but we deem it prudent to make the rate moderate and divide them amongst so many

⁵⁰ Mason Wade, *The Journals of Francis Parkman*, vol 2 (New York: Harper, 1947),425,440

⁵¹ Alexander Ramsey, *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs*, 1849, 31st Cong., 1st sess. (Serial 550), 1022

hands as will create a competition and restrain them from putting too high a value on the article, thereby insuring the consumption of the whole collection annually, and having the market clear for the succeeding crop.”⁵² This particular method of maintaining the bison market to ensure profits for the American Fur Company put immense pressure on the herds from both Native American and Euro American hunters attempting to extract a profit in the Great Plains market.

Estimates of the number of bison robes sold by Great Plains nomads to Euro American traders during the years that market forces influenced hunting are difficult to determine. A conservative estimate, put forth by William S. Hatton, who in 1849 conducted a survey of the trade between St. Louis and the Yellowstone River, suggested that about 110,000 robes were sold annually.⁵³ While this number may not seem catastrophically large, not all bison that were killed had robes that were suitable for trade, so many of the hunted bison were left wasted. It has elsewhere been suggested, by Dan Flores, a leading writer and researcher on the bison debate, that the Euro American hide hunters of the southern Great Plains claimed 3.5 million hides over the course of the 19th century.⁵⁴ Couple these factors with an everchanging chaotic environment in which animal populations are constantly in flux, in addition to new competition among bison for water and forage from nonnative European animals, we can see market forces likely provided the final blow to the bison populations of the Great Plains.

The collapse of the bison population was not unique. Previous fur-bearing species followed a similar trajectory of depletion and virtual extinction when faced with the forces of market capitalism. The beaver populations of the northwest were depleted in dramatic fashion similar to the collapse of the bison. In addition to the collapse of beaver and bison populations,

⁵² Ramsay Crooks to Pratte, Chouteau, and Co., March 3, 1835. *American Fur Company Letter books*, Letter book One, 247.

⁵³ Hatton, *Annual report of the office of Indian Affairs*, 31st cong., 1st sess., 1849, S. exdoc. 1 (Serial 550), 1074.

⁵⁴ Dan Flores, *The Natural West*. University of Oklahoma Press, 2003.

North America during the 19th century experienced widespread deforestation due to the expansion of steamboats. As detailed by Denig, fur-bearing species of United States ranging from the eastern United States to the Rocky Mountains and Pacific Northwest were all depleted in the name of the fur trade. Denig described that “The tendency of every fur trade is towards the extinction of the game and the diminishing value of the country for hunting.”⁵⁵

The collapse of North American beaver populations followed a similar trajectory as the destruction of the bison. Before the North American fur trade began, the Eurasian fur trade had already decimated beaver populations resulting in collapsing populations and extinction in other areas such as England in the 13th century. The demand for beaver pelts, however, did not stop. From the beginning of European colonization in North America up until the 1840s, the beaver fur trade united both Native American trappers and hunters with market capitalism in providing fur commodities to American and European consumers alike. One specific example of the beaver trade’s complex network between Native Americans and Euro Americans is the fur trade of New England in which both Iroquois and Pequot people developed trading relationships between colonists in trading beaver for European materials. By the 1840s, the North American beaver trade collapsed due to overhunting.⁵⁶

The destruction of fur-bearing species in North America over the course of the 19th century shows that market capitalism was the most vital necessary component to lead to the collapse of the bison populations. The temptation to assign blame to government conspiracies, or environmental factors, probably arises from naivete about the devastating consequences of market capitalism and its effects on the environment. As suggested by Dan Flores, “No

⁵⁵ Edwin Thompson Denig, *Five Indian Tribes* (Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1975).

⁵⁶ Strother E. Roberts, “Hunting Beaver: The Postdiluvian World of the Fur Trade.” In *Colonial Ecology, Atlantic Economy: Transforming Nature in Early New England*, 21–57. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv16t6g7v.5>.

conspiracy was required to annihilate the buffalo, and the only policy necessary was not to have one.”⁵⁷ The lack of a policy protecting animals throughout the Great Plains may be difficult to understand from a modern perspective. Nowadays, at least some Americans tend to be more eco-conscientious. But the prevailing economic attitudes of 19th century America were quite different. While we saw new innovations such as national parks, trustbusting, and environmental regulations during the Progressive Era, we saw the introduction of a more regulated capitalism. But the lack of regulation that preceded the 20th century allowed profiteers to easily decimate the fur-bearing species of North America. While it can be tempting to assign blame to the Euro American introduction of capitalism in the Americas, the fact that capitalism is a complicated series of interactions between multiple populations, most of whom are intent upon enriching themselves in a market, makes this assignment of blame reductive. That is not to say that other explanations for the destruction of the bison populations should not be considered, or did not influence the situation. In this thesis, we have underlying environmental factors, native American and Euro American cultural perceptions regarding westward expansion, and colonization. But the reality is that market capitalism is the most proximate cause of the bison’s destruction.

Marxist theory can help us understand what drives the commodification of nature and its effects on humans and the environment. It is important to analyze how perceptions of nature can be driving factors for the commodification of the natural world. Euro Americans viewed the Great Plains as undeveloped land in need of development and colonization. They also viewed the animals which lived on the Great Plains as a resource that could be processed into an economic resource. The baseline of the perception of nature from a capitalist perspective comes in the form of an assertion that until nature and its resources have been cultivated and refined, they have no

⁵⁷ Dan Flores, *The Natural West* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2003).

inherent value other than raw materials. Stephen Long, an explorer of the Great Plains in the early 19th century, documents this attitude, arguing that the Great Plains were “wholly unfit for cultivation and of course uninhabitable by a people depending upon agriculture for subsistence,” yet, they were, “peculiarly adapted as a range for buffaloes, wild goats, and other wild game.”⁵⁸ This attitude toward nature as a static source of development and economic opportunity results from the unconscious tendencies that capitalism exerts in commodifying nature.⁵⁹

Another important concept to examine is Euro American traders’ alienation from nature that may have spread to nomadic Native American societies, which formerly had deeper spiritual connections to the natural world (and especially to bison). The process by which bison – formerly a material means of subsistence – became a commodity to be hunted, killed, and sold for profit – illustrates a change in perception that was brought on by the introduction of capitalism to the Great Plains. While the incentive to hunt bison predated the introduction of capitalism on the Plains, the introduction of new incentives in the form of traded objects such as alcohol, ammunition, and clothing displays the change in the value a bison, which became a raw materials, similar (in some ways) to iron or timber. To fully fathom the destruction of the bison, it is crucial to understand the human tendency to derive value in nature based upon its ability to produce profit.⁶⁰ The alienation from nature that nomadic market hunters experienced did not come from a physical disconnection from nature, but rather from the unconscious transformation

⁵⁸ Stephen H. Long, “A General description of the Country Traversed by the Exploring Expedition,” in Edwin James, *Account of an Expedition from Pittsburgh to the Rocky Mountain, Performed in the years 1819, 1820* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme and Brown, 1823), in *Early Western Travels* vol. 17, 147-148.

⁵⁹ Stephen A. Mrozowski, “Colonization and Commodification of Nature.” *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 3, no. 3 (1999): 153–66. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20852930>.

⁶⁰ Steven Vogel, “Marx and Alienation from Nature.” *Social Theory and Practice* 14, no. 3 (1988): 367–87. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23557052>.

of their ideas about nature and its values, which in term derived from the introduction of capitalism to their societies.

The analysis of the collapse of the bison populations through the lens of Marxist theory regarding the commodification of nature and the environmental impacts of capitalism can be beneficial, however other Marxist theory stands as an impediment to careful interrogation of the story of the bison. One problem in Marxist theory is its tendency to project utopian proto-Marxist societal tendencies on indigenous societies. Specifically, early Marxist theorists such as Lewis H Morgan, an American anthropologist whose book *Ancient Society* argued that the Iroquois people of North America practiced “Communism in Living”⁶¹, and Fredrich Engels who asserted that hunter gather societies practiced egalitarian primitive communism. Engels developed this concept in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, arguing that the Iroquois tribe of North America lived in a classless primitive communistic society before the transition to capitalism brought upon by European settler colonialism. Engels describes this change, “The power of this primitive community had to be broken, and it was broken”, by “The lowest interests, base greed, brutal appetites, sordid avarice, selfish robbery of the common wealth which inaugurate the new, civilized, class society.”⁶² While market capitalism certainly had a determinantal effect upon nomadic Great Plains societies by contributing to the destruction of the resource they depended on, arguments asserting that their societies exhibited utopian socialist tendencies are naïve, and project Marxist ideals which should be criticized roundly.⁶³ The biggest problem with this particular utilization of Marxist theory is its trajectory within the

⁶¹ Lewis Morgan, *Ancient Society* (London: MacMillian & Company, 1877).

⁶² Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*. (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1978).

⁶³ Russel Lawrence Barsh, “Contemporary Marxist Theory and Native American Reality.” *American Indian Quarterly* 12, no. 3 (1988): 187–211. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1184494>.

cultural and political mythology that resulted in the unresolved debates regarding the collapse of the bison.

This projection of Marxist tendencies on precapitalist societies continues the “noble savage” myth. The noble savage myth originated in antiquity but was further developed by the 18th century Enlightenment philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau; it argued that primitive man lived in paradise with nature before becoming corrupted by civilization.⁶⁴ Rousseau used the concept of the noble savage to describe the innate goodness of human nature apart from the corruption of civilization but in projecting this myth upon Native Americans viewed them through the lens of caricature. Marxist concepts regarding primitive communism also use hunter gatherer societies such as the Native American Iroquois as another foil to advance their ideology and theories, once again perpetuating the caricature of Native Americans through the lens of European ideology. From the noble savage myth, the environmentalist movement of the 20th century influenced the Ecological Indian myth, the anachronistic concept that Native Americans lived in harmony with nature and are more in tune with ecology and environmental sustainability. The biggest problem stemming from this change in cultural mythology regarding Native Americans is the projection of European ideals regarding Native Americans as well as the cultural barrier it creates to understanding the realities of Native American societies. In studying the collapse of the bison and the interactions between Euro Americans, Native Americans, and the environment, it is crucial to recognize the importance of studying humans independent of credulous or unsophisticated cultural mythologies.

⁶⁴ Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

5 CONCLUSION

The collapse of the bison of the Great Plains of North America provides a cautionary tale in understanding the interactions between the human and nonhuman world. The putatively unresolved nature of the debate regarding the collapse of the bison helps us to see how people understand evidence differently, and reach varying conclusions, because they come from different standpoints. In exploring the three main perspectives it is essential to render judgement regarding the persuasiveness of their arguments. To be sure, none of these perspectives are worthless – they all contribute, in various ways, to the larger narrative that examines the destruction of the bison. Nevertheless, one perspective is more persuasive and explanatory than others.

The Native American perspective, while culturally resonant, does not advance the full understanding of the collapse of the bison and, taken to its extreme, may undermine honest debate. The reason for this harsh judgement stands on the interrogation of sources that do not hold up to scrutiny. The evidence for a conspiracy between the Reconstruction Era government of President Grant, United States military figures such as Generals Philip Sheridan and William Tecumseh Sherman, and the industrial economy, is quite thin. The main problem with this perspective rests on the fact it relies on a “speech” that General Sheridan purportedly delivered before the Texas Legislature in 1875, arguing against bison protections for the purpose of solving the “Indian Problem.” But as we have, he did not deliver such remarks. That is not to say American military men were not hostile toward Native Americans. They typically were. But we cannot substitute historical mythology for fact, simply for ideological reasons. That should never be tolerated. Nevertheless, Native American perspectives have shown however, that the United States government did not enact protective laws regarding the bison before it was too late.

Whether this stemmed from malicious or genocidal intent, or sheer incompetence, is up for debate. The attitudes of Manifest Destiny were apparent among United States figures associated with the destruction of the bison. And attitudes deriving from Manifest Destiny may have been destructive. But one has proved (or is likely to prove) the conspiracy that is intrinsic to the Native American perspective.

The environmental perspective offers a detailed and nuanced analysis of the bison within the Great Plains, including the natural factors that limited its population such as predation, disease, and drought, along with factors stemming from the introduction of Euro Americans and nonnative species. This contributes significantly to the story of the of the bison; it provides a baseline estimate of how many bison roamed the Great Plains and whether their numbers could handle additional stress factors. By determining the baseline of the bison before the rise of market capitalism on the Great Plains, this perspective stands as supplementally beneficial. The problem, however, rests on the argument that this perspective fully explains the destruction of the bison within the context of natural reactions. The bison of the Great Plains lived for thousands of years, facing environmental factors that whole time, but did not reach virtual extinction. To assume that the volatile nature of the Great Plains environment was the leading factor resulting in the destruction of the bison underestimates the destructive forces of humans on horses, driven by the forces of market capitalism. While the environment certainly plays a huge role in all interactions between the human and the nonhuman world, the argument that the Great Plains environment itself was the leading factor in the collapse of the bison populations remains unconvincing.

Finally, the market perspective provides a wholly convincing if less interesting story regarding the destruction of the bison. The interaction between Euro Americans and Native

Americans brought the nomadic people of the Great Plains into direct participation in the market. In addition to the Native American market participation of the northern Great Plains, white hide hunters were responsible for depleting the southern herds of bison in a similar profit driven manner. The bison could withstand natural predation for the purpose of nomadic subsistence but could not contend with the process of becoming a commodity in the industrial age. The market perspective stands as the most plausible reason for the collapse of the bison largely from its wealth of sources which detail the process of the bison robe market as well as the reality that other fur-bearing species faced the same depletion. The patterns between the collapse of the bison and the beaver populations of the Pacific Northwest provides as a crucial link in attempting to understand how a species with a fluctuating but large population could come to virtual extinction. The process of deforestation over the North American continent due to the heavy use of steamboats likewise provides insight into how unregulated capitalism can wreak havoc upon the environment.

Finally, the ideological blinders that have served as a barrier to the honest sober interrogation of data have also opened the topic of modern characterizations of Native American societies. The problem of these characterizations rests in a projection of preconceived notions on Native Americans rather than a clear desire to understand them as human beings. The myths of the Noble Savage, precapitalist utopian societies, and the Ecological Indian stand in opposition to the reality that all humans are capable of mistakes and atrocities, and that we all interact with nature and at times radically transform it in negative ways. To assume that the nomadic societies of the Great Plains were any different from any other group of humans provides a bias that stereotypes and mischaracterizes them. Fact is, much of this perspective relies on cultural myths

originating from Europeans and Euro Americans that have been projected onto Native American societies.

The concept of a conspiracy between the government, the military, and the 19th century industrial economy in some ways resembles a more comfortable myth than the new perspective that is emerging through authors such as Dan Flores, Andrew Isenberg, and Shepard Krech. These authors have pioneered a new methodology in analyzing environmental, market, and cultural changes which can help us to understand the bigger picture when examining the collapse of the bison. This mythology places blame on intentional historical actors who wanted to destroy the bison for political and economic purposes rather than discussing the more complicated topic market capitalism. This mythology arguably represents an unwillingness to confront the worst aspects of market capitalism. While the Progressive Era government eventually regulated the market, established national parks and began to protect animals throughout this country, the lingering destructive effects of capitalism continued albeit with less extremity than its Gilded Age industrial form. The importance of confronting the reality that unregulated market capitalism could destroy a population ranging from 30 to 100 million over the course of a century stands as the most consequential lesson when analyzing the story of the bison.

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