

WHAT EVIDENCE IS THERE THAT WESTERN INDIANS WERE CONSERVATIONISTS?

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Contemporary Indians are facing severe and continuing encroachment on their traditional and legal rights regarding access to the natural resources of this country. This has a profound effect on the socio-economic status of many of them, particularly those for whom hunting, fishing and trapping are still important sources of livelihood. Frequently, this country's game laws prevent Indians from supplementing their diet by hunting the animals which, no more than a hundred years ago in western Canada, were the major sustainers of their lives. The recent resolutions of the Canadian Wildlife Service and especially the Saskatchewan Wildlife Federation attest to these difficulties.¹

Canadian lawmakers recognize that this country's natural resources and wild game are becoming scarce and seek to apply conservation laws to all inhabitants equally. This has become a point of contention with the aboriginal peoples who claim a better relationship with this land and her resources as well as the right to utilize them as they see fit. Basically, many aboriginal peoples believe that conservation practices are inherent in their philosophy and traditional lifestyle. Add to this an intimate knowledge of their locales and ecologies, and the Indians feel that they are better equipped to prevent further over-exploitation of natural resources than are the concerned lawmakers.

This is a contentious issue. The claim of the Indians is often discounted by non-Indians who look to certain episodes in the historical past to prove their point: namely, the wanton and indiscriminate slaughter of the bison and the depletion of fur-bearing and other animals by certain Indian groups as documented by explorers in the early post-contact period.

There is no disputing the facts as they were recorded by these early observers. There should be, however, an attempt to understand the reasons behind such behavior by looking at the conditions at the time and by placing that particular era, the Early Historical Period, into the context of rapid cultural and economic change. For at least 11,000 years and perhaps longer, the aboriginal peoples of western North America had experienced a gradual cultural development, with little change until the intrusion of Europeans. They then experienced a drastic upheaval in their technology and social and cultural norms and institutions. Such upheaval could, in part, explain the apparent break with tradition: a change from an evident religious respect and reverence for the wildlife to an attitude seemingly self-destructive in its wastefulness, and finally, a reversal to conservation practices again in the present day.

The Great Plains of North America are known to have been occupied for at least 11,000 years and archaeological evidence indicates that bison and other large animals were hunted by the inhabitants at that time.² Indeed, the presence of vast numbers of bison on the Plains is considered to be

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the major factor in the occupation of such arid country by human groups until the extermination of the bison.³ The bison allowed them to live there and their lives were largely shaped by their quarry.

Full or seasonal nomadism was a prerequisite for the enjoyment of the potential abundance provided by the bison harvest, and reliable methods, based on the characteristics of the bison, were soon developed for taking them.⁴

Archaeological excavations at the Olsen-Chubbuck site in Colorado reveal evidence of one of those methods, a paleo-Indian bison drive of 10,000 years ago.⁵ One hundred and ninety bison were driven into a arroyo until it was filled to overflowing and the bison on the bottom were crushed by the weight of those on the top. Those who could not escape were killed by the spears of the pedestrian hunters.⁶ "Tons of meat awaited the knives of the hunters - meat enough for feasting, and plenty to dry for the months ahead - more meat, in fact, than they could use."⁷ The carcasses of those animals trapped in the bottom of the arroyo were left there to rot. The reasons for this are entirely practical. A band of a certain number of individuals could only use a certain amount of meat on the spot, could only dry and preserve a certain amount, and being pedestrian, could only carry a certain amount. Another factor is that limiting the number of bison taken in a jump situation is almost impossible:

The jump relied on a large number of animals. . . .
The leader or leaders of a small herd can detect a jump-off in time to stop, turn sideways, or do a 180° turn. Unless some force is there that is of sufficient magnitude to carry the animal over the jump-off, the animal in question will be able to avoid it.⁸

And, characteristic of the bison, "the sight of some of the animals escaping almost always causes the remainder of the herd to follow," causing the hunters to fail in their efforts.⁹

One must keep in mind the options that pedestrian hunting and gathering peoples had available to them in terms of hunting strategies. Certainly pedestrian hunting is a vastly different undertaking than equestrian hunting with guns, as in the Historic Period. Undoubtedly, communal bison hunting using a variety of jumps, pounds, and animal traps represented the most efficient method of procuring sufficient quantities of usable meat.¹⁰ These communal techniques rely on the herding behavior of these animals, which necessitated dealing with entire herds as opposed to solitary animals.¹¹ The major point here is that because of certain ecological variables, because of the behavior of the major subsistence animal, namely the bison, and because of the technology available to these prehistoric hunters, which was relatively simplistic, it was completely necessary that entire groups of animals be taken in a single hunting episode. This does not mean that each episode was successful; in fact, there was undoubtedly a high failure rate in terms of success of the hunt.¹²

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In conclusion, it may be argued that catastrophic communal bison kills are simply a matter of cultural ecology rather than any overt intention of resource depletion or wanton killing of game animals. Most ethnographic data show that hunting and gathering people are acquainted with some notion of conservation since their survival depends upon it. Often these notions may be couched in ideas such as hunting taboos, regulations, and selective slaughtering rather than some direct concept of conservation.

Although archaeological evidence cannot indicate whether or not there was any conscious effort to conserve or preserve wildlife on the part of the Indians, it does indicate that in most cases every usable part of the animal was utilized by them even to the point of breaking the leg bones for the marrow contained within.¹³

A more accurate picture of prehistoric hunting practices can be obtained by supplementing archaeological findings with early observances and recordings by explorers and traders, certain of whom maintain that the Indians were scrupulously careful neither to waste any usable meat, nor to kill game needlessly. Pierre Esprit Radisson, in 1661, stated that "the wild men kill not except for necessary use."¹⁴ F.G. Roe documents many such claims by early venturers onto the Plains and into the western woodlands.¹⁵ Among them, Father Hennepin observed the care taken by Indians not to scare the buffalo from their lands, as well as the practice of pursuing only those animals wounded by their arrows.¹⁶ Others had also observed that the Indians carried to their camp all usable meat where they dried it for future use.¹⁷ Randolph B. Marcy notes that the Indians of the southern Plains

supplied himself with food and clothing from the immense herds around his door; but would have looked upon it as sacrilege to destroy more than barely sufficient to supply the wants of his family.¹⁸

The importance of the buffalo to the Plains tribes cannot be understated. Roe contends, "I know of no other instance throughout the entire world wherein from one single source so many commodities of prime importance were derived."¹⁹ And according to William T. Hornaday,

If any animal was ever designed by the hand of nature for the express purpose of supplying, at one stroke, nearly all the wants of an entire race, surely the buffalo was intended for the Indian.

And right well was this gift of the gods utilized by the children of nature to whom it came.²⁰

From all reports the Plains Indians were certainly aware of this and were thankful for the bounty of nature, the bison ritual forming a large part of their religious custom.

The lives of the Indians who depended on [the buffalo] for their existence and culture were carefully arranged around the elaborate proceedings of the hunt. A complex fusion of practical habit and religious ritual attended the quest, killing and consumption of the animals.²¹

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The religions of North American aboriginal groups have been described as animistic, which refers to the particular belief that all of nature's living things, including men, plants and animals, have souls or spirit essences.²² Such a belief held that animals taken for human use had by choice submitted themselves to the hunter to provide for such use. This generous behavior could not be insulted or offended and great care was therefore taken with all aspects of the procurement of meat.²³

Arthur's description of an Assiniboine bison drive certainly illustrates the ritual care taken to ensure that the hunt was successful.²⁴ The entire operation was planned and executed by a shaman or a poundmaster known to have supernatural powers.²⁵ Beginning with the original invocation, a complex ceremony took place which lasted for the duration of the drive. This included making offerings to the buffalo spirit in the centre of the constructed pound, and finally, when the drive was successful and the frenzied buffalo were milling around in the pound, giving thanks to the "master of life" before the slaughter began."²⁶

It is true that all the animals trapped in a buffalo pound were killed, but this was because the Indians believed that such as might escape would warn their fellows in future against getting caught in a similar trap.²⁷

The religious beliefs and taboos surrounding man's relationship with the animals he depended on, therefore, required a great deal of respect for the animals. These taboos prevented hunting simply for sport and the wasting of meat.²⁸ The effect was conservation, whether or not it was the intent.

Regulations pertaining to the hunt were not all of a religious nature. In large buffalo hunting groups, communal hunting was preferred. Indeed, it was necessary to provide for everyone without scaring the bison away. Individual hunting could therefore be met with severe sanctions.²⁹

Group effort. . . was essential. To ensure cooperation, a governing council planned and disciplined each hunt as rigidly as a group of military tacticians might plan a maneuver.³⁰

Many tribes had soldier or warrior societies whose function it was to enforce the hunt regulations and carry out sanctions against offenders.³¹ Further, it appears that selective slaughtering practices were in existence and regulated by the soldiers:

The Tribal organizations of 'soldiers' whose authority often exceeded that of any chiefs, have been found in many 'buffalo Indian' tribes. The guarding of the herds from indiscriminate attack in calving-time was one of their primary functions.³²

Spry observes that:

The careful and systematic regulation of the buffalo

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hunt among plains Indians. . . was at least in part conservationist in effect and probably in intention, which is surprising when there seemed as yet to be no danger of scarcity.³³

There is no denying, however, that bouts of indiscriminate killing of animals were witnessed by early explorers. Samuel Hearne, on his exploring journey to the Northern Ocean in 1771, noted that the Athapascans frequently killed over twice as many deer as they could use, often taking only the choice parts and leaving the rest.³⁴ Hearne, deeming it a deplorable waste, entreated the Indians to cease such killing.

I was always answered, that it was certainly right to kill plenty, and live on the best, when and where it was to be got, for that it would be impossible to do it where everything was scarce.³⁵

And later, in discussing the large numbers of animals killed, he marveled:

It is wonderful they do not become scarce; but so far is this from being the case, that the oldest Northern Indian in all their tribe will affirm that the deer are as plentiful now as they ever have been.³⁶

F.G. Roe puts forth an interesting explanation for these episodes. Faced with times of hunger, the Indians learned to starve for days. But when the opportunity presented itself, they naturally indulged themselves well. He describes this psychological pattern as having been experienced by several northern travellers who had faced periods of starvation.³⁷ If this is indeed so, the introduction of the gun, and on the Plains, the horse, could add to the destructive power wielded in such times of indulgence.

A provocative hypothesis was put forward by Calvin Martin in his book, Keepers of the Game. Although dealing mainly with eastern woodlands Indians, he extends his theory to other tribes because of the nature of their religious beliefs. The Indians believed that the movements of the subsistence animals were directed by their "keepers" or "masters" who provided the game to the Indians for their use. If offended, the keepers could send sickness to the Indians.³⁸ With the arrival of the diseases of the Europeans, the Indians believed they had broken some taboo and that the relationship between themselves and the animals had deteriorated. The resulting process of "despiritualization," as Martin terms it, led to a decline in the sacredness of hunting taboos, and consequently, to the overkilling of game.³⁹ The effect of European disease on the Indians is certainly responsible for much death and destruction, but this is the first time it has been held responsible for the overkilling of animals by the Indians.

Another possible reason that it seemed the Indians overexploited certain resources may have been military strategy. Certain tribes may have sought to prevent intrusion of enemy tribes into their territory by leaving fewer animals to entice them.⁴⁰ Such strategy may have been overlooked or misunderstood by early observers.

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With his careful research, Roe casts doubt upon the validity of many claims of early travellers regarding Indian overexploitation.

The first impression created is that of utter wastefulness . . . writer after writer has emphasized this. A careful and critical examination of their arguments yields some curious results in certain cases, both in respect of polluted channels of information, and of sweeping assertion unsupported by adequate evidence . . . In fairness, however, it must be pointed out that many or most of these writers were but passing travellers.⁴¹

And,

The anti-Indian spirit of the nineteenth century requires that no statement concerning Indian slaughter of the buffalo be accepted without a most careful scrutiny.⁴²

Roe systematically discounts William T. Hornaday as any expert on the Indians, although concedes him to be quite knowledgeable about the buffalo.⁴³ Hornaday's level of understanding reflects more the "anti-Indian spirit" mentioned by Roe, than the results of careful, empirical research.

They all killed wastefully, wantonly, and always about five times as many head as were really necessary for food. It was always the same old story.⁴⁴

Let it be remembered therefore, that the American Indian is as much responsible for the extermination of our northern herd of bison as the American citizen. I have yet to learn of an instance wherein an Indian refrained from excessive slaughter of game through motives of economy, or care for the future, or prejudice against wastefulness. . . . If an Indian ever attempted, or even showed any inclination, to husband the resources of nature in any way, and restrain wastefulness. . . it would be gratifying to know of it.⁴⁵

Such accusations and assumptions, based on misunderstanding for the most part, are extremely harmful to the image of the Indian in modern society. Roe says:

Those portions of Hornaday's essay dealing with the Indian are the most unsatisfactory of the entire work. The exaggerations, the contradictions, the unsupported assertions, and the slovenly argumentation. . . are brought to bear against the Red Man.⁴⁶

Roe also brings up the point, as others do, that the Indian may well have seen no reason to conserve the game simply for the use of the Europeans encroaching on their land.

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It is possible to find instances in later days of the disregard of the call for prudence in respect of buffalo: but one cannot wonder that in 1868 tribal sanctions were less powerful than of yore; and concerning buffalo in particular, the young Indians could hardly be expected to refrain, simply in order to leave the more for outside intruders.⁴⁷

The resentment that the Indians felt towards incoming Europeans because of the competition for resources which they represented extended beyond simple concern for the animals to other natural resources such as trees, water and fish, and suggests a concern for the preservation of such.⁴⁸ The Blackfeet, at the negotiations of Treaty 7 in 1877, called for reimbursement for all the timber which had been cut by non-Indians up to that time.⁴⁹

The reported wastefulness of the Indians during the Early Historical Period is most difficult to reconcile with the obvious Indian respect for the life-giving animals. A recurring belief, however, was that there was no limit to the gifts provided by the Creator.⁵⁰ The Athapascans of Hearne's encounter illustrate this.⁵¹ And certainly no one initially believed that the numberless buffalo of the Plains would ever disappear.⁵² "More than one Indian tribe believed that the buffalo 'emerged each spring from the earth.'"⁵³ The nomadic lifestyle of most tribes allowed for a recovery to take place in a vacated area while the hunters found more game elsewhere. Such cycles may allow for the perception of limitless numbers.

By far the major reason for over-exploitation, however, was that the Indians' traditional economy and technology was being replaced. The acquisition of the gun and the horse revolutionized hunting, making over-exploitation an easy feat.⁵⁴ The economy of the fur trade demanded that more animals be hunted and trapped than would have been otherwise. On the Plains, pemmican, buffalo tongue and eventually buffalo hides were in great demand.⁵⁵ Again, a demand which was not there before--growing out of an opportunity for Indians to acquire desired trade items--led to a new economy based on the exploitation of game and fur-bearing animals. One need not look too far today to see examples of how much resource exploitation can take place to feed the opportunism of even a few individuals. McHugh describes some of the changes wrought by the horse and the fur trade:

In the 1880s, the demands of fur traders for more and more hides soon elevated the status of the Indian women, who prepared most skins for market.⁵⁶

Men began taking more wives, producing more hides for trade and acquiring "bartering power for providing guns, ammunition, tobacco, revered medicine bundles..." and eventually, "a new concept of personal property began to take hold among the tribes."⁵⁷ This represents a profound change in the social institutions of the Indians which contributed to the overkilling of animals.

The providence of nature was not doubted until the effects of increased

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population pressure, more destructive technology, and the economic demand for animals resources, began to appear. It was only then that

some, at least, of the Indians had made resolute efforts to prevent overhunting by strangers on their lands and increasing overuse of other natural resources. Such efforts took the form both of attempting to keep out intruders and of imposing limits on their hunting.⁵⁸

At least one band on the Northern Plains was observed in 1861 exacting heavy fines for the taking of bison by the Metis.⁵⁹ Upon reaching an understanding, therefore, that the resources of nature were limited and were being depleted by more men with new technology, and that such depletion would cause future hardship, the Indians did adopt what non-Indians would term "conservation measures."

Today many Indians still rely to a great extent on the fish and game resources available. Indeed, one might gain insight into the behavior of prehistoric and early historic Indians by looking not only at those tribes which still exist in relative isolation, but also by looking at the oral traditions which still exist and affect behavior among Indians in general. Among the Koyukon of Alaska, Richard K. Nelson has documented such conservation practices as maintenance of "subsistence range and territory, attitudes towards competitors, avoidance of waste, and sustained-yield practices."⁶⁰ The Koyukon have adapted to the variations in resource abundance over time by these methods, and undoubtedly will continue to survive by them if left alone to do so. Their conservation "ethic," as Nelson terms it, is summed up in practical terms by one of his informants:

People never kill animals for no reason, because they know there's times when they'll really need to kill anything they can find.⁶¹

In rural Indian communities today one can find evidence of traditional practices which reflect a concern for prevention of waste. A child learns not to kill needlessly when he finds he is expected to eat the produce of his hunt, no matter what kind of bird or animal it may be.⁶²

In conclusion it can be stated that western Indians were conservationist, as any hunter-gatherer group must be, to ensure their own survival. Conservation and resource management were effected naturally and were inherent in their religious beliefs, technology and nomadic styles of life. The period of indiscriminate exploitation during the Early Historic period was a very temporary one when seen against the backdrop of thousands of years of successful sharing of the ecosystems with animals. It was a period of adjustment to the new economy, and the new destructive technology brought by Europeans, as well as to the increased population pressure brought to bear on the environment. Our understanding of that period has been clouded by this drastic change and by misunderstanding and misrepresentation by reports of early explorers, such that "our current reconstructions reflect real Plains Indian cultures in the same degree as a good western movie."⁶³ Today the limits of natural resources are only too obvious to those directly dependent on them, and their concern is reflected in the following testimony to the Berger Inquiry in 1975:

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It is our greatest wish to be able to pass on this land to succeeding generations in the same condition that our fathers have given it to us. We did not try to improve the land and we did not try to destroy it. That is not our way.

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Notes

¹ Chief Andy Michael, "Hunting Propaganda," Star Phoenix, 28 Feb. 1984, Sec. A, p. 5, col. 2.

² G.C. Frison, Prehistoric Hunters of the High Plains (New York: Academic Press, 1978), p. 147.

³ Joe Ben Wheat, "The Olsen-Chubbuck Site: A Paleo-Indian Bison Kill," American Antiquity, 37, No. 1, Part 2 (1972), 91.

⁴ Idem.

⁵ Ibid., p. 1.

⁶ Idem.

⁷ Idem.

⁸ Frison, p. 229.

⁹ Ibid., p. 230.

¹⁰ F. G. Roe, The North American Buffalo: A Critical Study of the Species in its Wild State, 2nd ed. (1951; rpt. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970), p. 637.

¹¹ Wheat, pp. 87-88; and George W. Arthur, "An Introduction to the Ecology of Early Historic Communal Bison Hunting among the Northern Plains Indians," Archaeological Survey of Canada, Paper No. 37 (1975), p. 46.

¹² Frison, p. 230; Roe, pp. 638, 663; and Mathew Cocking, "An Adventurer from Hudson Bay: Journal of Mathew Cocking from York Factory to the Blackfeet Country, 1772-73," Lawrence J. Burpee (ed.), Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada, Series 3, Vol. 2 (1980), 107-116, as quoted in Arthur, p. 102.

¹³ Wheat, p. 2.

¹⁴ George Bryce, The Remarkable History of the Hudson's Bay Company (1900; rpt. Toronto, 1904), p. 6, as quoted by Roe, pp. 292, 655.

¹⁵ Roe, pp. 655-659.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 655.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 656.

¹⁸ Grant Foreman, ed., Adventure on Red River: Report on the Exploration of the Headwaters of the Red River by Captain Randolph B. Marcy and Captain G.B. McClellan (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1937), p. 171.

¹⁹ Roe, p. 602.

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²⁰ William T. Hornaday, The Extermination of the American Bison (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1889), p. 437.

²¹ Tom McHugh, The Time of the Buffalo (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972), p. 50.

²² Harold E. Driver, Indians of North America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 476.

²³ Calvin Martin, Keepers of the Game: Indian-Animal Relationships and the Fur Trade (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), pp. 35-36.

²⁴ Arthur, pp. 87-94.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 87.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 93.

²⁷ Irene M. Spry, "The Tragedy of the Loss of the Commons in Western Canada," in As Long as the Sun Shines and Water Flows, eds. A.L. Getty and Antoine S. Lussier (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1983), p. 207.

²⁸ McHugh, p. 52.

²⁹ Roe, p. 658; and Hornaday, p. 477.

³⁰ McHugh, p. 57.

³¹ Roe, p. 116.

³² Idem.

³³ Spry, p. 207.

³⁴ Samuel Hearne, A Journey from Prince of Wales's Fort in Hudson's Bay to the Northern Ocean 1769 - 1770 - 1771 - 1772, ed. Richard Glover (Toronto: MacMillan Company of Canada Ltd., 1958), pp. 75-76.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 76.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 76.

³⁷ Roe, pp. 661-663.

³⁸ Martin, pp. 38-39.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 156.

⁴⁰ Roe, p. 650.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 639.

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- 42 Ibid., p. 116.
- 43 Ibid. p. 641.
- 44 Hornaday, p. 480.
- 45 Ibid., pp. 506-7.
- 46 Roe, p. 664.
- 47 Ibid., p. 116.
- 48 Spry, pp. 213-14.
- 49 Alexander Morris, The Treaties of Canada with the Indians (Toronto: Belfords, Clarke and Co., 1880), p. 270.
- 50 Roe, pp. 650-54; and Arthur, p. 109.
- 51 Hearne, p. 127.
- 52 Roe, pp. 643-46; and Arthur, p. 109.
- 53 Roe, p. 643.
- 54 Arthur, p. 96.
- 55 McHugh, pp. 73-74.
- 56 Ibid., p. 77.
- 57 Idem.
- 58 Spry, p. 210.
- 59 John Rae, "A Visit to the Red River and the Saskatchewan, 1861," ed. Irene M. Spry, in The Geographical Journal 140, Part I (February 1974), 11, as quoted in Spry, p. 210.
- 60 Richard K. Nelson, Make Prayers to the Raven: A Koyukon View of the Northern Forest (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 201.
- 61 Ibid., p. 200.
- 62 Oral tradition and widespread practice.
- 63 Arthur, p. 122.
- 64 Philip Blake, "Statement to the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry," in Dene Nation - The Colony Within, ed. Mel Watkins (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), p. 8.