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American buffalo slaughter fueled by international trade

New paper argues European demand for bison leather was the culprit for near-extinction on the Great Plains

While the 19th century is surely one of the most inspirational periods in American history, it also bears witness to a less flattering record with regard to the environment: most significantly, the slaughter of the plains bison, or buffalo.

In a working paper for the National Bureau of Economic Research, University of Calgary environmental economist M. Scott Taylor argues that the story of the buffalo slaughter on the Great Plains is not, at bottom, an American one. Instead, Taylor argues that the slaughter of some 30 million bison over the course of a decade was initiatied by a tanning innovation created in Europe, and maintained by a robust European demand for buffalo hides for use as industrial leather.

Taylor used international trade records and first-person accounts of the hunt to show that that the widespread slaughter of bison between 1870 and 1880 was the result of a market for industrial leather that was virtually unregulated by the U.S. government as the country emerged from the Civil War.

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