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International trade doomed the American wild buffalo: study

by Michel Comte

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But if American hunters were selling buffalo hides on the world market and "as long as world prices remained

high, the incentive for the slaughter remained," he said.

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

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

The hides were used primarily in France, Britain and Germany for industrial belting and shoe leather, selling for 75 cents to 3.50 dollars each.

"In the absence of international trade and new tanning methods, the buffalo population would have (still) declined slowly over the next half decade," Taylor said, as cities sprouted in the Wild West and farmers encroached on their prairie habitat.

But "had the hunt been slowed, history might have been very different."

The economist noted that international trade usually pushes countries to specialize in industries in which they have a comparative advantage, and boosts productivity and income.

But the US experience is instructive for many developing countries that rely on resource exports, primarily as a warning they must move quickly to protect their natural resources to avoid depletion when global demand spikes.

In the buffalo case, "the speed of market forces was breathtaking and the speed of the US government's response was, not surprisingly, slow," Taylor commented.

"A foreign innovation turned the largest terrestrial mammal in North America into a valuable commodity and because of that it was hunted to virtual extinction very quickly."

Since the 1800s, thanks to conservation efforts, the buffalo population has climbed back to about 500,000 in North America today.

But the vast majority are privately owned and managed for commercial beef production.

As well, pure bloodlines have been lost through breeding with cattle.

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