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Europe Now Blamed for Decimation of American Bison

By [Corey Binns](#), Special to LiveScience
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North Americans have always taken the heat for killing off millions of American bison during the early 1800s. A new study, however, pins the blame on Europeans.

Europe's advanced tanning expertise drove the large, [iconic mammal](#) to near extinction in the United States, according to a review of international trade records, diaries and other historical documents conducted by University of Calgary environmental economist M. Scott Taylor.

"The story of the buffalo slaughter is surprisingly not, at bottom, an American one," Taylor said.

Theories blame hunters

In the 16th century, North America was home to an estimated 30 million bison, commonly called buffalo. By 1889, [Wildlife](#) Conservation Society General Director William T. Hornaday counted only 1,091 surviving bison. Although the elimination of the first half of the [bison](#) population took more than 100 years, the second half was killed in just 10 years, beginning in 1870.

The population has since rebounded somewhat, thanks to a 1905 initiative by the American Bison Society to introduce captively bred individuals whose descendents now number about 350,000.

The cause of the bison's rapid downfall has many theories, most of which blame hunters, with support from the U.S. Army, for destroying Native American livelihoods and making room for the railroads. In addition, cattle ranchers are said to have forced bison into smaller habitats.

Previous controversial studies have even pointed the finger at Native Americans. In the journal *World Archaeology* last year, University of Calgary archaeologist Dale Walde noted a marked increase in the size and frequency of bison kills by Native Americans beginning about 2,000 years ago.

He proposed that the Canadian Plains First Nations organized into large groups prior to the arrival of settlers and changed their bison hunting strategies. Temple University historian Andrew C. Isenberg suggests these practices—corralling herds into chutes and driving them over cliffs—were the beginning of the end for bison. The Blackfoot Indian tribe called the "buffalo jumps" *pishkuns*, which loosely translates as "deep blood kettle."

Role of tanning industry

Taylor says the guilty party sat on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean. The swift bison extermination was a result of an expertise in tanning heavy hides into leather developed in Europe, he wrote in a working paper for the National Bureau of Economic Research earlier this year. The innovation, not practiced in the United States at the time, sustained European's high demand for bison hides.

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In less than 400 years, the bison population in America declined from roughly 30 million to 1,091. During the 19th century, American Bison were prized for their hides, which were exported to Europe to be made into leather. Credit: Brad Harrison/stock.xchg

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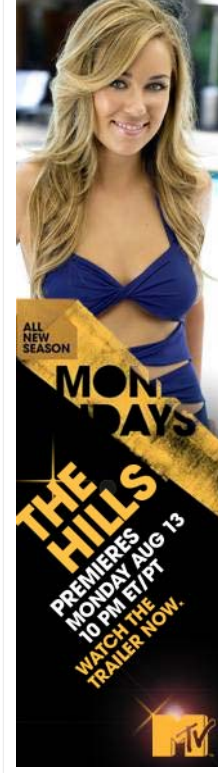
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