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New suspected killer in old case

A Canadian economist says European demand, not U.S. policy, was the reason for the slaughter of bison.

By **Dawn Walton**, Toronto Globe and Mail

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CALGARY, ALBERTA - The near-extinction of the plains bison in the United States has long been blamed on the advent of the railways, native overhunting and a government policy of slaughter designed to address the "Indian problem."

But a Canadian researcher has discovered that globalization was the real culprit for the decimation of the U.S. bison herd in the 19th century.

M. Scott Taylor, an economist at the University of Calgary who used international trade records and first-person accounts of the hunt, has found that European development of a cheap and easy tanning method after 1870 fueled that continent's insatiable appetite for bison hides, which could be turned into shoe soles and machinery belts.

"The paper is really about solving a murder mystery and showing that the usual suspects are in fact innocent and that this other suspect -- international trade -- is the guilty party," Taylor said.

His 57-page study, which presents an unconventional theory about what happened to the species, was recently published by the National Bureau of Economic Research, a prestigious nonprofit think tank in Cambridge, Mass.

The report deflects some blame from the Americans, but it is also instructive for many developing countries that currently rely on resource exports. Few have guidelines governing resource use.

"It is somewhat ironic that what must be the saddest chapter in U.S. environmental history was not written by Americans; it was, instead, the work of Europeans," Taylor wrote.

An estimated 30 million to 75 million plains bison, the lifeblood of indigenous peoples for thousands of years, once filled the continent extending from the northern Canadian prairies to Mexico.

Some argue that the 75 million figure is too high, and Taylor puts the number at perhaps 30 million at its peak in the United States. European explorers to the fledging country described it colorfully as "one black robe" of buffalo. ("Buffalo" is the commonly used but incorrect name for bison.) By the 1880s, perhaps only a few hundred wild plains bison remained on the continent. Estimates vary, but the number was pegged as low as 100 in the United States and eight in Canada.

Taylor recalled that his interest was first piqued while watching a movie that depicted the bison slaughter for robes. He compared the number of dead bison to the number of Americans who could possibly need coats. The figures, he said, didn't make sense.

He started to look through export figures, something other historians and researchers struggled to interpret or dismissed in favor of other attractive explanations.

The U.S. Army and government attempts to eliminate the bison in order to control the natives is well-

documented, and has been likened to a genocide.

"It would be a great step forward in the civilization of the Indians and the preservation of peace on the [frontier] if there was not a buffalo in existence," Texas Sen. James Throckmorton once said.

The market for robes, blankets and meat, as well as the ease of picking off animals from trains for sport, did contribute to the steady demise. So did drought, environmental change and new native hunting methods.

But the bulk of the species was wiped out in the United States in just one decade -- between the 1870s and 1880s -- immediately after the foreign tanning innovation, according to Taylor.

Hides sold for between 75 cents and \$3.50 during that period, and about 6 million were exported (millions more bison were killed) as European armies were being refitted with bison leather, which was found to be tougher than cattle hides.

The U.S. government, fresh from the Civil War, did little to protect its natural resources and fell to the whims of market demand.

The Canadian experience was different from that of the United States, according to historians. There was no hide market in Canada, Taylor points out. But researchers have fingered the fur trade, indiscriminate hunting by both natives and others, as well as habitat destruction for the loss.

Thanks to a concerted conservation effort, there are now more than 500,000 plains bison in North America, according to the Swiss-based World Conservation Union.

Despite the comeback, the vast majority of the plains bison are privately owned, many are managed for commercial production like beef, and pure bloodlines have been lost through breeding with cattle.

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