

21h.931 Seminar in Historical Methods
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A Brief History of Extinction

I count myself among those who like to regard Native Americans as protectors of Nature. In my mind, living their lives utterly at the mercy of the environment, the earliest settlers of this continent enjoyed a symbiotic relationship with the natural world. When the Indian hunted, he did so not for pleasure, but simply out of the necessity of requiring food, clothing, and household utensils. Naturally, being human beings with tempers, it cannot be denied that occasionally the Natives overestimated their need for food, and massacred far too many animals, or perhaps only used a limited amount of the resources made available by their kills (such as buffalo tongues and humps). However, never was there any wanton killing by Indians in pre-Columbian times comparable to that of the damage white recreational hunters and poachers inflicted when they overran the American continent beginning in the 18th century.

Along comes The Ecological Indian, which seeks to carefully eradicate these misconceptions from my mind. Indians, claims the author, were just as prone to waste meat and natural resources as the White Man. Far from taking only what they needed, Indians enjoyed the hunt, and wantonly decimated the stock of buffalo, deer and beaver. He does admit that Indians made efforts, however, at conserving animal herds in face of increasing decimation. What Kreech seeks to analyze is whether it was the influence of white men which first caused the Indians to change their approach of taking only what they needed (rather than poaching large numbers of beavers to trade their furs for alcohol and guns, leaving the meat to rot, for example), and consequently also inspired the Native attempts at conservation.

After reading his account, I am still partial to my view of the Indian. I simply cannot, on the basis of the evidence presented, ever believe that the Indian abused his environment as

much as the European settlers and adventurers did. What I can fathom, however, is a causal link between emerging European trade and the commodification of natural resources, which encouraged Natives to increasingly abuse the stock of wildlife to meet an ever growing European demand for furs. But simply because the White Man inflicted his attitudes toward the Environment on the Indian does not to me imply that it was also from the Europeans that the Natives learned conservation. While perhaps the Native American was not an ideal ecologist or conservationist, he was still far more understanding of the natural world around him, and I thus continue to chose to place him on a pedestal of environmental exemplarity.

The book itself was rather odd. It was a fun read, but it read more like a story of the history of certain animals of the North American continent, than like a genuine attempt to understand Native American approaches to the environment. The most fascinating chapters were not the “animal chapters”, but rather the early chapters of the book, stories of ancient settlements, Indian civilizations, and canals. Having traveled to Indian country a fair amount, I was familiar with most of the sites mentioned, and it was interesting to read a historical analysis on this subject. The extinction chapter was the only chapter from which I actually gleaned any new information. Who knew that there used to be giant beavers in the United States? I am sure it was a conspiracy by Harvard students to eliminate those...