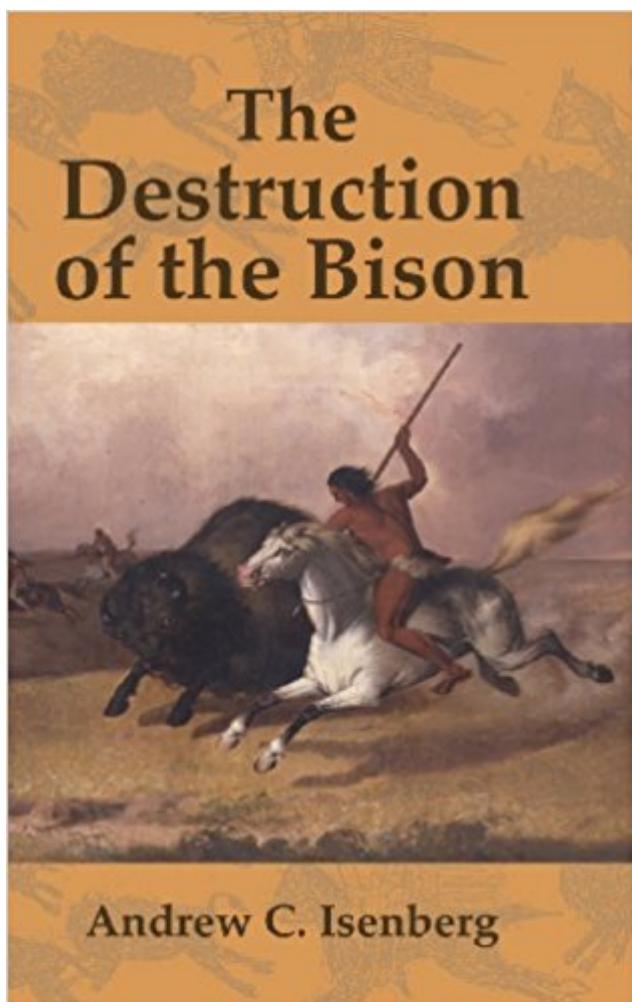


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The Destruction Of The Bison: An Environmental History, 1750-1920 (Studies In Environment And History)



Synopsis

The Destruction of the Bison explains the decline of the North American bison population from an estimated 30 million in 1800 to fewer than 1000 a century later. In this wide-ranging, interdisciplinary study, Andrew C. Isenberg argues that the cultural and ecological encounter between Native Americans and Euroamericans in the Great Plains was the central cause of the near extinction of the bison. Drought and the incursion of domestic livestock and exotic species such as horses into the Great Plains all threatened the Western ecosystem, which was further destabilized as interactions between Native Americans and Euroamericans created new types of hunters in both cultures: mounted Indian nomads and white commercial hide hunters. In the early twentieth century, nostalgia about the very cultural strife that first threatened the bison became, ironically, an important impetus to its preservation.

Book Information

Series: Studies in Environment and History

Hardcover: 220 pages

Publisher: Cambridge University Press (March 28, 2000)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0521771722

ISBN-13: 978-0521771726

Product Dimensions: 6 x 0.6 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 1 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.5 out of 5 stars 17 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #629,381 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #160 in Books > Science & Math > Nature & Ecology > Endangered Species #709 in Books > Science & Math > Biological Sciences > Animals > Wildlife #2335 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Anthropology > General

Customer Reviews

Isenberg (history, Princeton) employs interdisciplinary methodology to explain the ecosocial factors that led to the destruction of 30 million bison during a 50-year period. Tracing the movement of Native American tribes from sedentary cultures to hunting societies that depended upon the horse to hunt bison on the Great Plains, the author discusses the impact of Euroamerican economics on the Native peoples. Fur trading of the 18th century altered Plains culture, as did the 19th-century demand for bison hides. These encounters between Native Americans and Euroamericans were the

central cause of the near extinction of the bison. Isenberg also considers other factors such as drought, disease, and the introduction of domestic livestock. This case study of extinction and the preservation of a species will have a wide appeal and correlate with such books as Shepard Krech's *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History* (LJ 8/99). Recommended for all libraries.-Patricia Ann Owens, Wabash Valley Coll., Mt. Carmel, IL Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc.

"Thoroughly researched and well-written, *The Destruction of the Bison* is an example of modern interdisciplinary scholarship that is not only convincing, analytical, and informative, but also a joy to read. This book will prove valuable to the academic specialist, the student, and the general public." American Studies International "The Destruction of the Bison is an engaging, well-written, and lucid account of a story that has been told many times, but is only now beginning to be truly understood." Peter S. Alagona, *The Professional Geographer* "Isenberg's well-researched and very readable environmental history provides a more compelling explanation that acknowledges the interaction between a dynamic natural environment and the human societies that inhabited it." Economic History "...elegant....Isenberg has found an impressive array of sources for his history....a detailed, convincing instance of how civilizations expand, it is profoundly instructive." William H. McNeill, *The New York Review of Books* "A well-researched, well-documented book, *The Destruction of Bison* is, best of all, a compelling read. It has a narrative that sweeps the reader through the two hundred pages quickly. The book is, simply, an engrossing history...the book remains one that students, academics, and many adults would learn from and enjoy. *The Destruction of Bison* would be a good choice for academic libraries as well as for many public library collections. Highly recommended." E-Streams "This case study of extinction and the preservation of a species will have a wide appeal and correlate with such books as Shepard Krech's *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History*. Recommended for all libraries." Library Journal "To be filed in this month's don't-judge-a-book-by-its title category....[Isenberg's] impassioned first book is much more than an ecological history of American wildlife." Publisher's Weekly "The book works well as a teaching tool: it reveals complex causation while maintaining clarity and readability. As environmental history, the book is extremely satisfying...Isenberg appreciates the dynamism of culture, economy, and environment on the Plains. His treatment of Indian experiences, though overgeneralized, is still subtle and complex." Emily Greenwald, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* "The Destruction of the Bison is certain to stimulate discussion of its author's conclusions and likely to remain a standard work of environmental history for years to come." William A. Dobak The National Archives Washington, DC

Isenberg is brilliant and we're lucky to have him out there visiting libraries, sifting through archives, pondering predicaments, and typing up a wonderful book like this one. I came to it trying to understand Columbus Delano's unravelling of the 1868 Peace Treaties, the mining exploration of the Black Hills which he ordered in 1872, and his opposition to the 1874 legislation that could have saved the Northern herd. Also I want to understand the effects of the widespread corruption within the Department of the Interior ("venal" is Isenberg's word) and whether the War Department would have been more fair in their dealings with Native Americans. I am still not completely satisfied on those issues and will continue to search, but Isenberg provides more on Delano than any other source I have come across. Isenberg's strongest point is analysis of the nomad culture that rose to prominence over the settled, agricultural Missouri River villages beginning with the acquisition of the horse and culminating after the smallpox epidemics of 1780-82 inverted the power relationship and left the nomads "virtually unchallenged for authority in the plains." He points a telescopic lens at the nomadic culture and offers detailed analysis from a refreshingly distant, unromanticized perspective, for instance bringing to light other studies that demonstrate "mammal hunting is the least reliable of subsistence sources." It was a tenuous existence, born out of the biological devastation of smallpox, and knocked down repeatedly by further epidemics. In 1837, there were mortality rates of up to 90% in one tribe. "Atomization" is the word Isenberg uses to describe the devastating longterm effect this caused. He quotes Denig from the 1850s: "Their former good order and flourishing condition deranged, they are no more the same people. Their tempers are soured and all their fierce passions raised against the authors of these evils." Unfortunately, Isenberg does not continue this thread beyond the 1850s. During the important post Civil War era, his attention largely shifts to the Euroamericans and his observations there are instructive but incomplete. In 1889, Hornaday included a treatment of the debate in congress over legislation to protect the bison and Isenberg digs deeper on the same subject, but he seems to write without regard to his previous chapters. I would like to read his analysis of the nomads during the 1860s and 1870s. One gets a sense that he might consider this too hot to handle. Perhaps Isenberg feels pressured by his cultural surroundings -- late twentieth century academia -- and self-censors. His tone begins to veer toward the self-righteous and there are some hip-shots at the usual easy targets like Custer (attributed with having "led" the expedition into the Black Hills with no mention that it was ordered by Delano) Kit Carson (killed Navajo sheep and Isenberg leaves it at that) and Sherman (who by his own account was powerless 1870-76, encompassing the same period as the slaughter of the Southern herd.) Like so many other writers on the subject, Isenberg seems attracted to the idea of blaming the army, though the sentiment is undermined by evidence he provides, such as letters written by General

Hazen and Lt. Brackett deplored the slaughter of the Southern herd. Isenberg faults Colonel Dodge for not stopping hunters, but the Medicine Lodge Treaty was administered by the Secretary of Interior Delano, who claimed that Euroamerican hunters were not excluded from hunting south of the Arkansas River. In 1832, George Catlin already foresaw the threat to the buffalo and proposed a "nation's Park" inhabited by both bison and the Indians that hunted them "[that] might in the future be seen (by some great protecting policy of the government) preserved..." Isenberg seems to favor Catlin's voice over all other clamor on the subject but he holds his cards close. He maintains a contemporary academic distance which can sometimes be a great tool and othertimes seem as if he is looking through some cloudy pince-nez. It could be instructive to follow Catlin's idea to its hypothetical conclusion-- what-if?-- and investigate what such a thing might have looked like, to fully understand what was lost. Catlin's proposal might seem "patrician" but Isenberg leaves little doubt that such measures were necessary: protection of the greatly outnumbered Native Americans from Euroamerican settlers, territorial politicians, miners, and other Native Americans, as well as starvation and disease; protection of Euroamericans from raids by nomads who were devastated by disease and an ephemeral hunting subsistence; protection of bison from the crossfire of both nomads and Euroamericans to ensure a sustainable population. This is a great book but there's still more to say on the subject. We need to keep trying to understand.

Fascinating book. Great for anyone who has any interest in the Native Americans, ecology, the environment, the real history of the US (not the candy coated textbook nonsense they feed our kids in public school), and finally the human effect on wildlife in North America and beyond. Our unabashed exploitation of the bison was just the beginning of a history of complete disregard for any part of nature we don't see a profit in.

Isenburg provides a clear historical analysis of how the icon of the west became an industrial commodity. An important study of an often talked about but misunderstood episode in the history of the American West and the history of the American Environment.

a very fair discussion about a American event which still affects us all. I recommend the book as it covers not only the Destruction of the Bison but also the historical milieu of the time which caused the event(s).

Great natural history of the American bison and their connection to Plains region native tribes.

Important resource.

Great book on Bison history, but if you are looking for something that doesn't read like a text book this isn't for you. Great book for the history of the America Bison, but be aware of the format. immense number of footnotes and references to other text books.

American indians and the bisons destruction a great book that tells the real story in an action packed dime novel type story

Andrew Isenberg presents an array of complex and systemic causes that brought about the near extinction of the North American bison. The author's breadth of knowledge related to the bison demise is incredible. The reader is not bored with endless details behind these knowledge blocks, however. Rather, in fairly short order, the reader understands how climatology, geography, economics, sociology, migration and immigration, policy, and anthropology all played a role in the bison's destruction. And while the author presents an incredibily well researched description of the bison's destruction, along the way, the reader learns volumes about how Native Americans lived, changed their lifestyles, and were linked to the bison. The reference listings are impressive for those needing further information and authentication. Anyone interested in how the American plains were settled and shaped, this is an enjoyable read. For the researcher, this book is a gold mine.

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