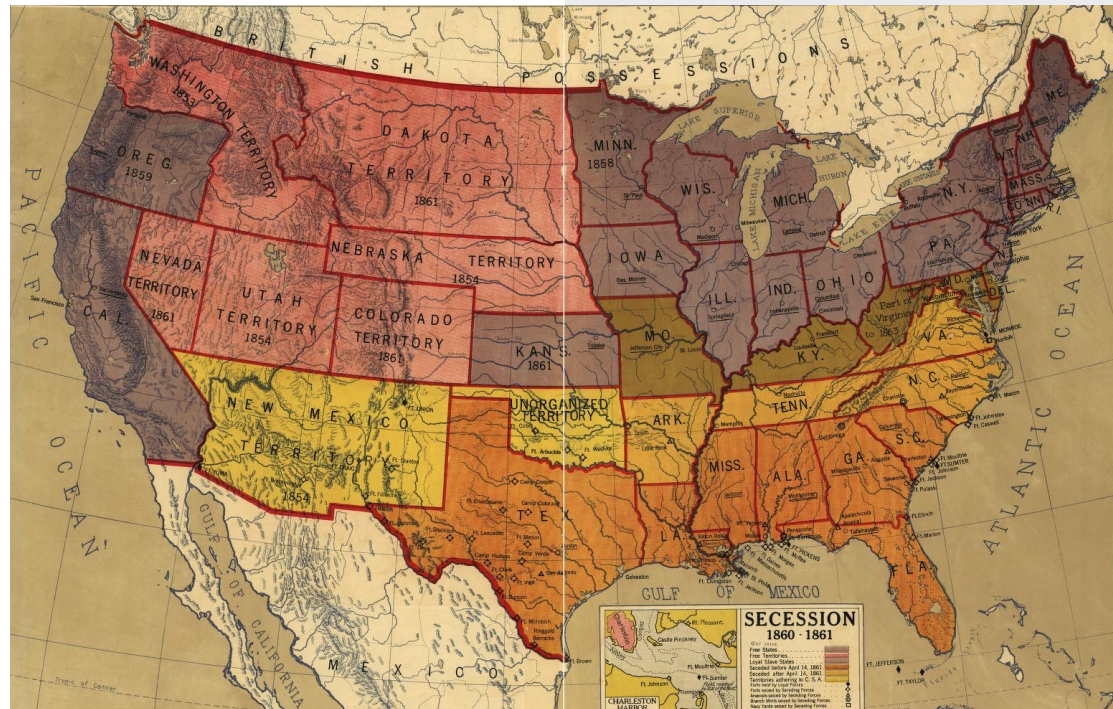


Clearing the Way for National Parks in the United States



Introduction

This reading will integrate the Anglo-American ideas of wilderness that William Cronon found so troubling with the ideas of elite white men as being the only group who can legitimately hunt. Both of these threads intersect in the long historical trends that influenced the creation of the national parks system in the United States. We will untangle these threads by looking at Native American hunting practices before and after the arrival of European colonizers as well as the social and cultural attitudes about hunting that these Europeans brought with them. We will then see how national parks were imagined to be unpeopled wilderness spaces but nevertheless remained the home and hunting groups of many groups.

CLEARING THE WAY FOR NATIONAL PARKS IN THE UNITED STATES

INTRODUCTION

HUNTING IN EARLY MODERN AMERICA, 1600-1800

ANIMALS AND HUNTING IN NORTH AMERICA

THE BEGINNINGS OF THE AMERICAN CONSERVATION MOVEMENT

Hunting in Early Modern America, 1600-1800

Just like in Africa, hunting has been an important component of life in North America for centuries. Prior to the arrival of the Europeans, different Native American groups engaged in a variety of hunting practices for the same reasons that people around the world have hunted: for food, for profit, and for power. Because it would be impossible to detail all the hunting practices of every tribe in North America, this module will use a few key examples to talk about hunting and wildlife in the northeastern woodlands and the western plains of the United States.

In the pre-colonial period groups like the Lenni Lenape in the greater New York area engaged in subsistence hunting as a seasonal activity. During the spring they would migrate to the coast to fish and gather seafood such as oysters. During the summer and early fall they would plant and harvest crops such as beans, corn, and squash. Then, during the winter, they would move upstate and hunt large game such as deer, moose, and bison with bow and arrows or spears. Throughout the year, the Lenape would set snares and traps for small game, such as rabbits.

Such subsistence patterns were common across the northeast. While we do not see commercial fur hunting on the scale that would emerge during the colonial period, there is evidence in long-distance trade of luxury goods and much of the economy of the northeast was animated by the trading of wampum, strings of beads made from the hard shell of the quahog clam. Similarly, this region did not see elite hunting on the scale of walled paradises or deer parks, but tribal leaders utilized social power when deciding when and where to start controlled burns and subsequent game drives.



***The Lenni
Lanape in New
Sweden, on the
Schuylkill River,
1700***



Key Terms:

Lenni Lenape

Res nullius

Terra nullius

Indian Removal
Act

Bison

Conservation
Movement

Adirondacks

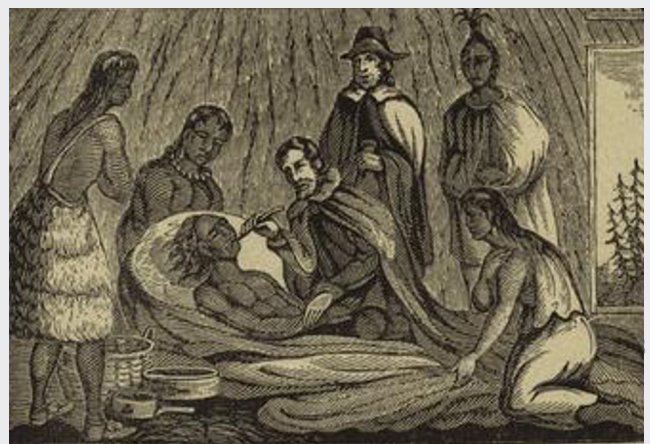
Yellowstone

Poaching

Europeans began to arrive in the northeast in the early seventeenth century; some of the first settlements in Massachusetts and New York were established in the 1620s. The early European colonizers brought many changes—both intentional and unintentional—to the environment of the northeast and the hunting practices of the Native Americans who lived there. Europeans brought new species of domesticated animals with them like pigs, cattle, and horses. They let their pigs roam free in the forests, and the pigs ate the acorns Native Americans collected and ground into flour. European colonizers built fences to contain and protect their cattle, and these fences disrupted hunting trails and turned controlled burns into acts of arson. When Europeans first arrived in the northeast they were impressed by the open, park-like feel of the forests. These conditions were achieved by annual firing of the landscape to clear off new growth and underbrush while leaving the mature trees relatively untouched. Such conditions were ideal for stalking deer on foot. As the Native American population decreased through starvation and disease and the survivors were often violently forced away from European coastal settlements, the managed landscape changed into a patchwork of cleared farm fields and dense, impenetrable forests heavy with undergrowth.

Europeans brought zoonotic diseases with them, such as smallpox, measles, and pneumonia. Native American populations had little to no immunity against these diseases, and their symptoms were exacerbated by the upheavals of intermittent warfare and malnutrition. Additionally, when an outbreak occurred in a village, the entire community could fall ill, leaving no one to nurse the sick. The ensuing population loss was devastating. Because we do not have population statistics for pre-Columbian America, we cannot know with certainty the mortality rate of Native Americans following the first European contact in 1492. Estimates vary from 50% to 90% of the population lost to disease, violence, famine, and political upheaval in the wake of European colonization. Whatever the number, this rapid population loss upset hunting practices. Smaller groups may no longer have had enough able-bodied hunters to left to organize hunting parties in the fall or winter months. When an entire generation was lost, their local knowledge and practices were not passed down to subsequent generations of hunters. And as Native Americans were forcibly removed from their ancestral lands their place-based hunting knowledge became obsolete.

By and large, Europeans were not troubled by the collapse of Native American populations and lifeways. Some, such as the Puritans in seventeenth-century Massachusetts, even welcomed the development as evidence of God's plan for a Christian settlement of the New World. They considered the forests to be dangerous and ungodly places that needed to be tamed and brought under the plough. They saw Native Americans as the devil incarnate preventing them from bringing these plans to fruition. Therefore, when Native Americans died from epidemics or were pushed out of their territory by colonial violence such as King Phillip's War, Puritans believed that God was supporting their plan to tame the wilderness.



Anglo-American woodcuts depicting the devastation of smallpox on Native Americans



Painting depicting an English Earl fox hunting, 1805

English Influences on American Hunting Practices

Most early colonists in the northeast originally came from England and so their attitudes towards wildlife and hunting were influenced by their homeland. This included ideas regarding the role of hunting in the broader economy and who was allowed to hunt legally. It seems that during much of early English history, the Roman doctrine of **res nullius** was in effect in regard to game animals. This meant that the person who slew the animal had the rights to the products and profit of the kill regardless of whether the hunt culminated on private property or land held in common. After the Norman conquest in 1066, hunting in England shifted from being largely a widely-practiced subsistence activity to being a royal prerogative. Large tracts of land were designated the king's forest and hunting with pits, traps, and nets was outlawed in these areas. Hunts became pageants of power and medieval accounts claimed that over 1,000 men and hounds would be enlisted to drive deer for royal hunts but only the king and his courtiers would be given fresh meat. It is in this era that the mythology of Robin Hood, the moral poacher of the corrupt king's deer, began.

Hunting codes and norms grew more elaborate throughout the medieval and early modern periods. Pieces of literature, such as *The Book of Howlett*, were composed to distinguish the fine social gradations that informed falconry. Edward Plantagenet, Duke of York, wrote *The Master of Game* in the fifteenth century to articulate the noble qualities possessed by an elite hunter. By the Elizabethan era there were over 700 deer parks maintained for the pleasure of noble hunting parties and anyone who killed even so much as a rabbit in these parks could be executed as a poacher. In the 1670s, English game laws underwent minor reforms so that the landed gentry, and not just the nobility, could legally hunt on their own property. This led to a rising popularity of fox hunting. This now classic English elite hunt utilized thoroughbred horses and hounds and enlisted the services of dozens of local people as beaters to drive the fox into the path of the mounted hunters. Such ritualized killing was often followed by the hunting party dining al fresco, which increased the visual links between hunting, leisure, and wealth in early modern England.



A Robin-Hood like figure depicted in *Le Livre de Chasse*, by Gaston Phébus, 14th century

John Whetton Ehninger, October, 1867 depicts idyllic scene of North American farming

Most English people who emigrated to the Americas in the early modern period were from the working and middle classes. Their familiarity with hunting culture was therefore confined to observing elite hunting as a show of power and an act of leisure. In the Americas, these European colonists immediately took to hunting when they had the means to do so.



Though not regulated by the same restrictions as in England, when Europeans hunted for food they did so because they had the luxury of leisure time in which to pursue game. The “real” work of colonization, to their minds, was farming. Therefore, they considered anyone who relied too heavily on hunting for their subsistence to be uncivilized or lazy. This could apply to impoverished white men who moved to the backcountry to trap fur. They most often applied this characterization to Native American men.

Many of the tribes in the northeast practiced a gendered division of labor in which women farmed and gathered close to the village and men engaged in hunting, included extended trips during the fall and winter months. Of course, this basic pattern varied with different environmental and cultural conditions. It was widespread enough, however, to elicit regular comment by European observers. Using racist tropes similar to those employed by Europeans describing African hunters and hunting practices (as we read in Reading 2), early English colonists characterized Native American male hunters as lazy and unwilling to support their families. This is because they based their interpretations on the English gendered division of labor in which men typically did the heavy work of field clearing and ploughing. They also based their interpretation on English ideas of hunting as an elite activity undertaken for pleasure, rather than survival. By using a gendered interpretation of hunting practices to claim that Native American men were lazy, European colonists could go on to claim that no Native American could properly manage territory or improve it through farming. Rather, this imperialistic thinking went, Native Americans were too close to the natural environment and were therefore no more capable of owning land as property than deer or bears would be. Such thinking became the justification for the doctrine of **terra nullius**, or empty land, evoked by European colonists when they wished to steal land from Native Americans and turn it into farmed property by claiming that land was unpeopled.



Albert Bierstadt's 1863 The Rocky Mountains, Lander's Peak is based on sketches from his travels with the Frederick W. Lander Survey Party, and depicts Eastern Shoshone peoples. It was sold for \$25,000 to railway entrepreneur James McHenry in 1865, the most ever paid for a painting at that point.

Creating an Empty Land

Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, European colonists and then the American government turned the idea of terra nullius into a reality. Native American populations had already collapsed from epidemic diseases, malnutrition, and warfare. In the northeast, the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries saw a subsummation of smaller Native American tribes from the coast into larger inland groups that shared a similar language. In the case of the Lenni Lenape, some of the surviving members moved north and west to join the Six Nations of the Iroquois League. These types of migrations were ostensibly voluntary, but they were the result of increasingly constrained choices brought on by European colonization and their changes to the land.



Map of Lenapehoking, the Lenni Lenape lands, prior to the arrival of Europeans

In the early decades of the new republic of the United States federal policy officially welcomed Native American nations into treaties with the Euro-American government and sought to introduce them to "civilization" and European-style farming. These policies were, at best, unevenly implemented and were often undone by individual acts of violence or property destruction on the part of Euro-American settlers. However, many tribes in Georgia, Alabama, Tennessee, and the Carolinas were beginning to adopt plough- and fence-based farming. The Cherokee Nation bought a printing press and began to print a bilingual newspaper. By any metric, this fell into the European category of "civilized."



Map of the "Trail of Tears"

Then, in 1830, President Jackson undid all these cooperative policies all at once with the Indian Removal Act. This law forced the Choctaw, Muscogee, Seminole, Chickasaw, and Cherokee to leave their farms and forests in the southeastern United States and migrate to lands in and around modern-day Oklahoma where they could purportedly live free from the interference of the United States government. The 2,000 miles they walked became known as the Trail of Tears because of the 60,000 people who were forced to make the journey, over 10,000 died along the way.

Throughout the nineteenth century, the United States government continued its policy of forcibly removing Native Americans from territory Euro-Americans wished to settle. In 1889 Oklahoma Territory, the end of the Trail of Tears, was opened to white settlement and the land was parceled out into property for eager settlers in the space of a few hours. The next year the US Census Bureau declared the American frontier was officially "closed," as there was no discernable demarcating line between areas of dense and sparse settlement, but rather discrete pockets of unpeopled space. These frontier bubbles, as it were, continued to spark the Euro-American imagination and contributed to their cultural perception of the wilderness as untouched and primeval, as discussed in Reading 1. Most of the remaining unpeopled spaces in the American West, however, were the result of a century of United States government policy to remove Native Americans from their ancestral land and resettle them on reservations. The unpeopled wilderness is a historical construct developed by Euro-Americans in the early modern period.

Animals and Hunting in North America

Before turning to the creation of national parks in the United States, we will look at two case studies of how Native American hunting practices changed with the onset of European colonization. Here, both the beaver and the bison are at the center of the story of their dramatic transition from animal to natural resource.

Beaver

The North American beaver, *Castor canadensis*, is a member of the rodent family. While it is famous for its dam- and lodge-building and its anthropomorphized industriousness—the “busy beaver”—its unique pelt made it a desired commodity and crucial to the transatlantic fur trade from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries.

Furs and pelts of all kinds were popular items of clothing in Europe during a period of global cooling known as the Little Ice Age, which lasted from approximately 1300 to 1850. During this time, the northern Atlantic region experienced colder and longer winters than it had before or since. Because most of the heating in this period was done with increasingly scarce and expensive wood, people had a tendency to wear more clothing to stay warm.

In the sixteenth century, the Eurasian beaver supplied most of this demand, but by the seventeenth century overhunting had taken its toll and the population shrunk alarmingly. This spurred the nascent North American fur trade and the Hudson’s Bay Company formed in 1670 for the purposes of controlling that trade.



American Beaver, by John James Audubon, 1844



French military surgeon's hat, made from beaver and lined with silk, 1830-1860

The reason beaver fur was so desirable to European consumers during this era went beyond its warmth. A beaver has a double coat of long, coarse outer hair and short, fine inner hair. They also secrete a water-proofing oil known as castoreum into their fur. This, combined with the barbed or hooked texture of the hairs of the undercoat makes beaver fur ideal for felting. The furs were agitated until the entire pelt became a stiff, waterproof mat that was perfect for shaping into hats. The tricorne and bicorne hats so popular with men in the late eighteenth century—think George Washington or Napoleon—were made of felted beaver pelts.

Prior to the arrival of Europeans, Native Americans had hunted beaver for pelts and food. Beavers are not very dangerous prey, and because they build lodges and loudly slap their tails on the water, they are relatively easy to track as well. When commercial beaver hunting began in earnest in the seventeenth century, many Native Americans were surprised by the amount of trade goods they received for one beaver pelt. An Innu hunter was recorded by a Jesuit priest in the seventeenth century saying: "The English have no sense; they give us twenty knives like this for one Beaver skin." Another Innu said, "The Beaver does everything perfectly well, it makes kettles, hatchets, swords, knives, bread; in short, it makes everything."



Map of Algonquin language groups

These comments signaled the beginning of a cycle that would repeat itself several times during the following centuries as beaver populations collapsed and rebounded and commercial hunters moved to new territories: "Indians unhesitatingly exchanged mundane beaver pelts for rare and useful European technology, competition fueled exchange, and beavers became scarce" (Krech, 191).

Northern Algonquins, a linguistic confederation of tribes involved in the commercial fur trade, had traditionally organized their land into family hunting territories. These loosely defined boundaries demarcated where particular kinship groups were allowed to hunt. These family territories pertained less to mobile animal populations, such as deer, and more to the location of sedentary populations, such as beaver. Beaver populations themselves were more likely to be managed by hunting families as well, with restrictions on hunting particular types of beavers (e.g. breeding females) or at certain times of the year (e.g. the spring birthing season) in order to maintain a reproducing population.

During the height of the commercial fur trade, these family territories were often protected like alienable property. Travelers might be allowed to pass through a territory unmolested and may even be allowed to hunt certain types of animals for food. In other cases, travelling could become trespassing and result in violence or even death. While not a universal system across the region, the widespread use of these family hunting territories allowed many Northern Algonquin to consistently profit off the beaver trade and understand when populations had reached dangerously low levels. By the twentieth century, the Northern Algonquin used their longstanding family hunting territory system as evidence of their commitment to conservation and thus their suitability for sustainable resource management in Canada.



A collection of muffs, commonly made of beaver fur, as well as kerchiefs, and other assorted items, 1647



Bison

Herd of bison in Little America Flat, Yellowstone National Park

Bison used to be found across most of temperate North America. These enormous herbivores can weigh up to 2,000 pounds for a mature male. They spend most of their time grazing in herds but can occasionally stampede at speeds of up to 35 miles per hour. Their coats are thick, warm, and water-resistant. They went extinct east of the Mississippi River by 1830 and were almost completely wiped out across the continent by 1890. The approximately 30,000 wild bison that exist today in the continental US are mostly descendants of a small herd that took refuge in Yellowstone National Park. At the time of writing, an additional 400,000 bison are being raised as livestock.

Most of the Euro-American textual sources we have on the great bison herds of the western plains, such as the *Notes and Letters* of George Catlin, emphasize their uncountable multitudes. Population estimates vary widely, but it is likely that there were at least 30 million bison before their population collapsed with the coming of the railways in the 1860s. They were a staple of Plains Indian culture, providing food, shelter, clothing, and tools to groups such as the Blackfeet. Hunting techniques varied with time and culture; the arrival of the horse in the late seventeenth century and the gun in the eighteenth also influenced hunting practices.



Hunting Buffalo, Alfred Jacob Miller, 1858-60

Until the late eighteenth century, most bison hunting was undertaken primarily for subsistence or ritual purposes. Solitary stalking with a spear, bow and arrows, or a gun was a common practice, particularly on snowshoes in the winter. Bison were generally content to stay put as long as the hunter's scent remained downwind. Group hunting typically involved the entire community in a drive. For instance, the Assiniboine dressed one hunter in the fur and horns of a bison and he acted as the runner to stir up the herd and guide it toward a cliff edge. Other members of the tribe waved furs or banged drums along the route to keep the bison heading in the correct direction. Everyone would then gather at the bottom of the cliff to slaughter and butcher the fallen bison. Major hunting events such as this, that could keep a community fed and clothed for an entire year, were often accompanied by rituals and feasting. With the advent of horses and guns, hunting became more efficient and the amount of goods people could own and carry increased as well. For instance, when loads had to be carried by people and dogs, Blackfeet tipis were typically six to eight hides, but with the advent of horses, the tipis grew to ten or twelve hides.

Through the first half of the nineteenth century, the amount of any given bison that was used varied widely. Blackfeet reported to missionaries and Euro-American traders that they used every part of the bison and indeed the list of bison-derived products is well over 100 items long. However, in the large communal drives it was usually the fattest meat and the hides that were taken while other parts of the bison were left to waste.



Blackfoot tipis, c. 1910

Because the bison population was self-sustaining in the era before commercial hunting, such practices were not detrimental and indeed represented a rational use of time and energy on the part of Native American groups. Even when Plains Indians hunters began to trade bison hides, dried tongue, and pemmican for guns, cloth, and other metal tools, they integrated several parts of the animal into Euro-American trading networks and did not harvest to the point of extinction.



Mid-1870s pile of bison skulls, to be ground for fertilizer (above); "Slaughter of Buffalo on the Kansas Pacific Railroad," 1889 (below)



It was when elite white hunters entered the western plains on the railway from the late 1860s that the bison population collapsed. Euro-Americans hunted with high-powered rifles from horseback or out the window of a train car. Sometimes the animals were hunted for commercial purposes, with the tongue or hide being the most popular commodity, but they were just as often killed for sport and left where they lay. This is because bison herds had the reputation of being inexhaustible and so shooting a few was imagined to be nothing more than target practice.

Other Euro-American hunters decimated the bison for a more sinister purpose. Tribes such as the Dakota resisted being forced onto reservations because they said they followed the bison and relied on the animal for the majority of their material needs. Therefore, went the reasoning of the US government, if the bison herds were destroyed, the Dakota would have no choice but to enter reservations. By the 1880s, this genocidal line of thinking had become a reality. Thousands of Native Americans starved in the winter of 1886-7 when a particularly harsh winter froze to death tens of thousands of the bison left in already severely depleted herds. Within a few years, both the bison herds and the Plains Indian culture built around hunting them had all but disappeared. Today, members of the Blackfeet, Salish, and Kootenai tribes are at the forefront of wild bison conservation in and around Yellowstone National Park.



Wolf in Yellowstone

The Beginnings of the American Conservation Movement

In Reading 1 we discussed the ways in which the idea of wilderness was socially constructed in the Anglo-American imagination as a place that is both sublime and a frontier. To go into this imagined wilderness was therefore to enter into an emotional state where one might be able to commune with a higher power. It was also a place where men could demonstrate their physical, mental, and moral superiority over the land and its inhabitants. This imagined wilderness is untouched by time or human hands. It is simultaneously a place of contemplation and a masculine proving ground.



Ferdinand V. Hayden, whose 1871 geological survey expedition into northwest Wyoming confirmed the grandeur of Yellowstone

We also learned that the actual material wilderness is a peopled space and that safely traversing the landscape or hunting animals requires coordination with other humans. In eastern Africa, white imperial hunters tried to ignore or discount the contributions of Africans whose labor was necessary for a successful hunt. In the United States, the Indian Removal Acts were designed to deliberately clear the landscape of people, thus contributing to the belief that the wilderness was untouched. The attitudes and policies that contributed to the creation of the national parks system also cleared the wilderness and defined the boundaries of an “appropriate” relationship between humans and the non-human environment. As East Coast elites began to shape the conservation movement, previously acceptable practices became illegal acts. Hunting and fishing became poaching, controlled burns arson, foraging became trespassing, and cutting trees theft. This criminalized many aspects of daily life for Native Americans and Euro-American rural poor alike.



View of St. Regis Canoe Area from Long Pond Mountain in Adirondack Park

The Adirondacks

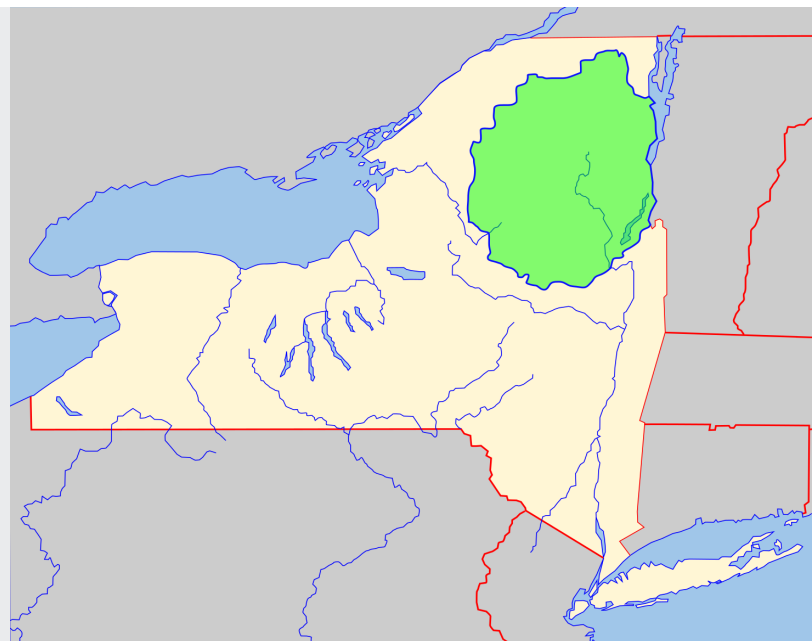
One example of this takes place in the Adirondack Mountains in upstate New York. The area was a frontier farming territory in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, but began to see out-migration from the 1830s as US expansionist policies opened up more western land to white agricultural settlement. By the 1870s, there were approximately 16,000 people living in this three million acre hilly and wooded territory, most of whom were small farmers supplementing their agricultural activities with hunting, fishing, and foraging. Most of the sources we have pertaining to this community come from court records or observations penned by elite visitors. The rural poor generated few written records and most of those were not preserved in archives.

Additionally, as much of the hunting, fishing, and foraging activities of this group became criminalized during this period, they produced even fewer written records. In general, first-person accounts of illicit activities are confined to court testimonials; people do not want to leave incriminating writing behind. Therefore, just as with African laborers and Native American hunters, to understand the lives of Euro-Americans living in rural poverty, we have to read elite sources "against the grain." In doing so we can see that not everyone thought that the creation of national parks was a good idea.

The push to turn the Adirondacks into a protected park began in the 1860s, with the publication of George Perkins Marsh's *Man and Nature* in 1864. This book is a seminal text of the American conservation movement. Marsh argued that the improvident management of natural resources has irrevocably ruined the environment for future human use. One of his key examples was Roman deforestation around the Mediterranean that permanently changed what Marsh believed was once a fertile forest into a barren landscape.

Marsh then turned his critique to nineteenth century logging companies, particularly those who engaged in clear cutting pines and other commercially valuable trees. He called for the conservation of large swaths of forests in upstate New York, including the Adirondacks, so that humans could escape the city and enjoy the regenerative solace of nature. By 1872, there was significant lobbying in Albany, the state capital, to turn the Adirondacks and the Catskills into protected state parks. In 1892, the state set aside three million acres for conservation and leisure purposes.

Map of New York State showing the Adirondacks (top) and Catskills (bottom)



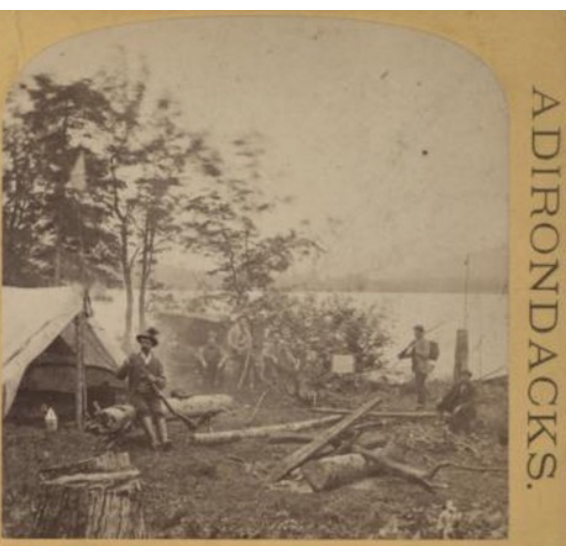
This might seem an early triumph of the conservation movement, but as so often happens in history, matters were not as simple as they first seem. The creation of the Adirondack Park was predicated on the idea that it was a wilderness space that needed to be protected from human intervention. The plan for the park did not take into account the 16,000 people that were already occupying the space. When the state government legislated restrictions on hunting, fishing, and foraging, they did so with the elite hunter in mind. This hunter came up from a coastal city, usually for a few weeks in the summer, and hunted and fished for leisure. Leisure hunting falls into the category of hunting for power because it was only elites with disposable income and free time who could afford to leave work and rent or purchase a hunting lodge and private park. Much of this territory was removed from the commons before the state park was established, but even these private spaces were governed by conversation laws meant to limit the harvesting of flora and fauna and the techniques that were acceptable for doing so.



An Adirondack guide (left) with his urban "sport"

Essentially, the new laws designated elite hunting practices as the only legitimate way for humans to interact with the non-human environment. Patience, physical skill, and technological prowess were valued in this system. Efficient subsistence practices were banned as "unsportsmanlike." Fishing with nets was no longer allowed, only rod-and-reel fishing was acceptable. Hunting was to be done on foot and with no help other than a rifle. Hunting at night and using a lantern to blind the deer was outlawed, as was hunting with dogs and most kinds of snares and traps. These laws also set limits on how many fish or deer could be harvested in a given year. Again, the limit of two or four animals per year was meant to ensure there was always a replacement population, but the numbers were a reflection on the habits of elite, seasonal hunters rather than the rural poor who relied on fish and game to supplement their diet year-round.

That these policies criminalized the subsistence activities of the rural poor was not simply because the legislators forgot about this population when drafting their laws. The elite population also did not trust the rural poor to act as appropriate stewards of the wilderness. Because the wilderness was sublime, elites believed a certain emotional sensitivity was necessary to truly appreciate the environment. Such ideology was also informed by the Romantic poets and American Transcendentalists such as Emerson and Thoreau.



Both groups were sensitive to the emotional transformations that could be wrought by spending time in the wilderness. That the rural poor could neither appreciate nor protect the wilderness is similar to the attitudes imperial elites held about local people in eastern Africa and Native Americans across the United States. Additionally, policies that criminalized subsistence practices forced the rural poor off the land and into urban wage labor during this age of rapid industrialization.

Camp scene in the Adirondacks, late 19th c

Yellowstone

A similar story unfolds in and around Yellowstone National Park. This was the first national park in the United States and its over two million acres of mountains, watersheds, geysers, and bison were protected under the 1872 Yellowstone National Park Protection Act. It was created as “a public park or pleasureing-ground [sic] for the benefit and enjoyment of the people.” (Quoted in Jacoby, 82) In 1895, a congressional report on Yellowstone outlined what had become its three chief functions:

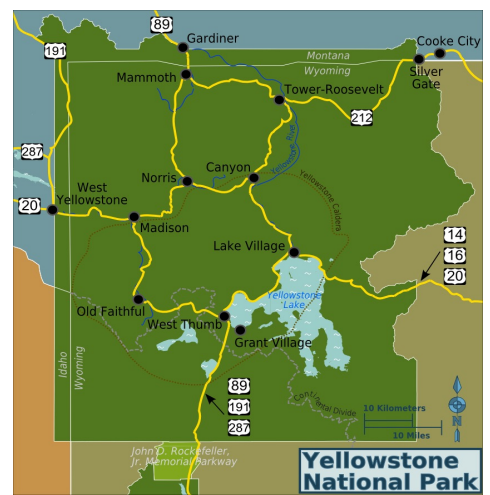
- First. As a region containing some of the chief natural wonders of the world.
- Second. As the largest of the forest reserves.
- Third. As the greatest existing game preserve (ibid).

Yellowstone was wilderness exemplified. It contained awe-inspiring vistas and opportunities for urban men to test themselves in a contained frontier space. While hunting was technically outlawed in the boundaries of the park, the animals that ventured off the game preserve provided ample sport for the elite hunter.

Yellowstone was also supposed to be an unpeopled landscape. Because of the mountainous character of most of the park, it sat on the periphery of many Native American lands including those of the Nez Perce, Blackfeet, Crow, Lakota, Shoshone, and Bannock. Though none of these groups established large, annual encampments in Yellowstone, the entire region was crisscrossed with hunting trails and these Native American groups were active in managing the landscape to increase the edge habitats that were so fruitful for hunting. Edge habitats are spaces where grasslands and forests abut and are a favorite of elk and deer. Controlled burning of dense forest undergrowth made stalking animals easier and ensured that the forest did not encroach on the edge habitats.

Early Euro-American tourists to Yellowstone, who often called themselves “explorers,” tended to erase the Native American presence from the wilderness when they wrote about their experiences. Even when they encountered Shoshone hunters, for instance, they imagined the Native Americans to be temporary sojourners merely crossing the landscape rather than regular inhabitants of a territory they managed for their own economic benefit.

Map of Yellowstone National Park



Euro-American park managers viewed these Native Americans with distrust, believing they could not be rational stewards of a sustainable landscape. This was particularly the case when it came to controlled burns. In 1871, the Peshtigo Fire of northeastern Wisconsin destroyed around 1.5 million acres of commercially valuable forest and killed over 1200 people. The event served as a catalyst for anti-fire forest management policies that have continued well into the twenty-first century. Smokey the Bear is emblematic of the twentieth century's obsession with protecting forests from fire at all costs.



Burned trees in area between Norris & Canyon following the 1988 Yellowstone fire.

However, in the first decade of Yellowstone's existence, there were no more than ten park managers monitoring all two million acres at any given time. Hunting, foraging, and burning edge habitats—though they were now classified as poaching, trespassing, and arson—continued almost unabated. These activities put stress on the belief that a national park could conserve the wilderness and threatened the existence of the nascent program. Therefore, in order to better police Yellowstone, US Army soldiers established Fort Yellowstone on the northern edge of the park near the Montana border.



For the next thirty-two years, the army used an oversimplified idea of nature and a top-down structure to manage Yellowstone. For starters, the army banned burning, a policy that would more or less continue until the devastating fire of 1988, in which 36 per cent of the park went up in flames due to a combination of lightning strikes, a dry summer, and a century's accumulation of undergrowth as fuel.

They also pushed the remaining Native Americans onto reservations and arrested any they found "trespassing" in the park. Punishment for trespassing or poaching began with a month of solitary confinement at Fort Yellowstone and a diet of bread and water. For repeat offenders, all of their property was confiscated. However, the near-starvation conditions of the reservations in the 1880s meant that many subsistence hunters continued to take the risk and return to Yellowstone time and again.

Philetus Norris, the second superintendent of Yellowstone. His predecessor, Nathaniel P. Langford entered the park twice during his five years in office - once during the 1872 Hayden Expedition and to evict a squatter in 1874. Norris was appointed in 1877, and oversaw the construction of roads and offices, hired the first 'gamekeeper,' and campaigned against hunters and vandals.

Poachers were not just Native Americans, but also Euro-Americans who had migrated to Montana and Wyoming and used subsistence hunting to supplement their work as manual laborers or farmers. These small, mostly poor communities on the fringes of the park proved to be tight-knit in the face of army investigations of poaching. There were few informers, and those that did write to the army typically did so anonymously. Intermittent subsistence hunting was almost never reported; instead, these communities brought in the army when they felt one of their members or, more likely, an elite interloper, was hunting in a way that was detrimental to the community. Some of these Euro-American men even extended their sympathies to Native American hunters, as many of them married Native American women.

While we should not romanticize these communities, they are emblematic of some of the major class, race, and environmental issues animating nineteenth century rural America: “the desire for self-sufficiency, the drive to prove one’s manliness and daring, the hope of avoiding the dependency of the workplace—as well as... abiding notions of community responsibility and of one’s right as an American to hunt” (Jacoby, 146).

Army policies also upset the food web of Yellowstone. While soldiers attempted to stop the poaching of elk by humans, they still continued to kill elk-eating wolves in the name of protection. An almost predator-less elk population exploded and grazed certain portions of the park to stubble, which led to erosion and the silting up of rivers and lakes. Additionally, the elk liked to feast on aspen and willow saplings, favored species for constructing beaver lodges and dams. These factors depressed the rebound of the beaver population, which was only just beginning to come back after centuries of intensive commercial hunting. Without water management by the beavers, many of the ecologically diverse wetlands in the area dried up. So while Yellowstone maintained its geysers and mountains, under army management it failed to fulfill its role as a space containing some of the “chief natural wonders of the world” because of the wide-spread environmental degradation.

Bison in Lamar Valley, Yellowstone National Park



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