

Whose Buffalo? - Fact Sheet

Before the late 1800s, between 50-60 million buffalo roamed North America's Great Plains. Whose buffalo were they? They were not "owned" by anyone. Yet two major groups of hunters, the Plains Indians and commercial buffalo hunters claimed the right to kill as many buffalo as they chose for a variety of reasons. As the buffalo began to disappear from the plains in huge numbers, the Indians and the commercial hunters clashed over the question, "Whose buffalo?"



Plains buffalo.

The buffalo played an important role in the lives of nomadic Texas Plains Indians, especially the Comanche and Kiowa. More than a hundred year before commercial buffalo hunters began killing the Plains buffalo for profit, Plains Indians had hunted buffalo for their main source of food, clothing and housing. These tribes used every part of the buffalo, from the horns to the tail, and even gathered buffalo chips to use for fuel. In 1849, American historian Francis Parkman (1823-1893) wrote, "The buffalo supplies the Indians with the necessities of life; with habitations, food, clothing, beds and fuel, string for their bows, glue, thread, cordage, trail ropes for their horses, covering for their saddles, vessels to hold water, boats to cross streams." The Plains Indians also traded buffalo hides to other Indian tribes and to Mexicans for items they needed.



Stack of buffalo hides at a Dodge City hide yard. Photo courtesy of the Kansas State Historical Society

After the Civil War (1860-1864) the buffalo also became an important resource for thousands of commercial hunters who needed employment in a time when cash and jobs were scarce. Industrial growth in the United States and Europe during the 1870s was driving demand for machinery belts made of leather, and the extension of railroads after the Civil War made it easier to transport buffalo hides to the industrial eastern markets. Selling of buffalo hides opened up foreign markets in England and Germany, where buffalo leather machine belts were helping factories produce much wanted and needed consumer goods.

Commercial buffalo hunters, armed with their powerful, long-range rifles, could kill hundreds of buffalo in a single day, and by 1872, a million buffalo had been killed for profit. Commercial hunters generally took only the hides (which sold for between \$2-3 apiece), and the buffalo tongues, (which sold for around 25 cents apiece), and left the edible buffalo meat to rot on the Plains.

To the Plains Indians, the buffalo was sacred, an important part of their religion. Before and after successful hunts, Comanche and Kiowa Indians performed rituals devoted to the buffalo, including special songs and dances. The killing of millions of buffalo by commercial hunters was threatening the Indians' nomadic way of life, which centered on the buffalo. Plains Indians hated seeing buffalo carcasses left by the commercial hunters to rot on the plains and would often attack the commercial hunters, killing and scalping them.



Plains Indian encampment with buffalo hide tipis.

Commercial buffalo hunters felt the Plains buffalo were a great resource that could earn them a great deal of money. Buffalo hunter, Frank H. Mayer once stated, "The buffalo didn't belong to anybody. If you could kill them, what they brought was yours." Commercial hunters didn't think it was fair that the Plains Indians attacked them for killing animals that roamed wild on the plains.

In the Medicine Lodge Treaty of 1876, the United States government had promised to let the Plains Indians hunt buffalo south of the Arkansas River as long as the buffalo ranged there. In turn, the Plains Indians agreed to live on government reservations. Neither side kept the treaty. The Indians hunted buffalo and attacked commercial hunters outside their reservations, and the U.S. army protected commercial hunters who shot buffalo on Indian lands.

Chief Ten Bears, who signed the Medicine Lodge Treaty, later said, "Two years ago, I came upon this road following the buffalo, that my wives and children might have their cheeks plump and their bodies warm. But the soldiers fired on us, and since that time there has been a noise like that of a thunderstorm, and we have not known which way to go."

"Whose buffalo?" remained a controversial question throughout the 1870s and was debated far and wide. By 1884 nothing remained of the massive buffalo herds but piles of bones by the railroad tracks that farmers had collected and sold to fertilizer factories.