

# The Extermination of the American Bison

by William Temple Hornaday

*Noted zoologist and wildlife conservationist William Temple Hornaday wrote a book on the state of the American bison, or buffalo, for the Smithsonian Institution. Hornaday's concern was that the dramatic drop in population of the buffalo might likely lead to its extinction. An estimated 60 million buffalo lived in the U.S. before 1800. At the time Hornaday wrote his report, hunting had dramatically reduced the number of buffalo living in the wild. The Smithsonian published his book as part of its annual report for 1886-87.*

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Of all the deadly methods of buffalo slaughter, the still-hunt was the deadliest. Of all the methods that were unsportsmanlike, unfair, ignoble, and utterly reprehensible, this was in every respect the lowest and the worst. Destitute of nearly every element of the buoyant excitement and spice of danger that accompanied genuine buffalo hunting on horseback, the still-hunt was more butchery of the tamest and yet most cruel kind. About it there was none of the true excitement of the chase; but there was plenty of greedy eagerness to "down" as many "head" as possible every day, just as there is in every slaughter-house where the killers are paid so much per head. Judging from all accounts, it was about as exciting and dangerous work as it would be to go out now and shoot cattle on the Texas or Montana ranges. The probabilities are, however, that shooting Texas cattle would be the most dangerous; for, instead of running from a man on foot, as the buffalo used to do, range cattle usually charge down upon him, from motives of curiosity, perhaps, and not infrequently place his life in considerable jeopardy.

The buffalo owes his extermination very largely to his own unparalleled stupidity; for nothing else could by any possibility have enabled the still-hunters to accomplish what they did in such an incredibly short time. So long as the chase on horseback was the order of the day, it ordinarily required the united efforts of from fifteen to twenty-five hunters to kill a thousand buffalo in a single season; but a single still-hunter, with a long-range breech-loader, who know how to make a "sneak" and get "a stand on a bunch," often succeeded in killing from one to three thousand in one season by his own unaided efforts. Capt. Jack Brydges, of Kansas, who was one of the first to begin the final slaughter of the southern herd, killed, by contract, one thousand one hundred and forty-two buffaloes in six weeks.

So long as the buffalo remained in large herds their numbers gave each individual a feeling of dependence upon his fellows and of general security from harm, even in the presence of strange phenomena which he could not understand. When he heard a loud report and saw a little cloud of white smoke rising from a gully, a clump of sage-brush, or the top of a ridge, 200 yards away, he wondered what it meant, and held himself in readiness to follow his leader in case she should run away. But when the leader of the herd, usually the oldest cow, fell bleeding upon the ground, and no other buffalo promptly assumed the leadership of the herd, instead of acting independently and fleeing from the alarm, he merely did as he saw the others do, and waited his turn to be shot. Latterly, however, when the herds were totally broken up, when the few survivors were scattered in every direction, and it became a case of every buffalo for himself, they became

wild and wary, ever ready to start off at the slightest alarm, and run indefinitely. Had they shown the same wariness seventeen years ago that the survivors have manifested during the last three or four years, there would now be a hundred thousand head alive instead of only about three hundred in a wild and unprotected state.

**Questions**

1. Explain what you think the author means by a “still-hunt.”
  
2. How do you think the author feels about a “still-hunt”? Use at least two citations from the passage to support your answer.
  
3. At the time that the author wrote the passage, how many buffalo were alive in the wild?
  
4. Do you think it is a valid argument to blame the “stupidity” of the buffalo for its extermination? Why or why not?

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**Vocabulary List**

Each of the vocabulary words below are used in the reading passage. As you read the passage, pay attention to context clues that suggest the word's meaning.

1. ignoble
2. destitute
3. jeopardy
4. unparalleled
5. phenomena
6. manifested

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**Context Clues**

Using context clues from the sentences in the passage, underline the correct meaning of the word in boldface.

1. "Of all the methods that were unsportsmanlike, unfair, **ignoble**, and utterly reprehensible"  
a. dishonorable; shameful    b. secret; hidden    c. common; frequent    d. usually ignored
2. "**Destitute** of nearly every element of the buoyant excitement"  
a. consisting; full    b. confident or sure of    c. wanting or desiring    d. lacking; deprived
3. "not infrequently place his life in considerable **jeopardy**"  
a. upheaval or uproar    b. reversal; switch    c. trouble or danger    d. discussion; spotlight
4. "The buffalo owes his extermination very largely to his own **unparalleled** stupidity"  
a. natural or normal    b. straightforward; direct    c. occasional    d. unmatched; considerable
5. "even in the presence of strange **phenomena** which he could not understand"  
a. sounds or visions    b. events or happenings    c. new technology    d. strange people
6. "Had they shown the same wariness seventeen years ago that the survivors have **manifested** during the last three or four years"  
a. shown or displayed    b. rejected or refused    c. completed; finished    d. wanted; desired