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History 460 Section 301
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Midterm exam

3. The centuries prior to 1900 saw North America becoming ever more integrated into markets and trade networks that became more geographically extensive over time. Using examples drawn from lectures, readings, and discussion sections, analyze what you see as the most important impacts this process of market expansion and integration had on the lives of native peoples, plants, and animals in North America.

The North American landscape has been shaped by markets and trade ever since the Europeans first discovered the Americas. Trade was not a new concept to the Native Americans; there is extensive archaeological evidence that they traded some commodities—like pipestone for making pipes, or native copper from Michigan’s Keweenaw Peninsula for making jewelry—over quite extensive geographic areas long before they had contact with Europeans. The arrival of European economic interests, however, greatly increased the volume and diversity of trade in North America, profoundly impacting the human cultures and natural ecosystems of the continent. Early European accounts of North America, like Wood’s *New England Prospect*, often saw animals, plants, and other natural resources as commodities that could be harvested and sold at a profit. This market-based view of natural resources dramatically changed the American landscape.

Fur-bearing mammals, especially beavers, were one of the first types of organisms to be classified as a commodity. European fur traders found that they were not as successful at hunting beavers as the native peoples, so they traded things like copper and brass kettles, beads, and wampum for beaver pelts harvested by the Indians—who hunted beavers almost to extinction to meet this new market demand. Historians have suggested several theories as to why the native peoples would manage their resource base seemingly so irresponsibly. These include the “cool stuff” theory that Indians saw the superiority of European technology and threw aside all caution in their haste to acquire as much as they could; Calvin Martin’s theory that the Indians blamed animals for epidemic diseases and were declaring “holy war” on them; and Cronon’s theory in *Changes in the Land* that the Indians wanted trade goods like wampum more because of their value as status symbols than their practical value. Regardless of their motivation, the fact remains that the market for furs—itsself driven mostly by fashions for a certain type of hat in Europe—led nearly to the extinction of the once-numerous beavers.

As the United States expanded westward during the nineteenth century, the hunting of wild animals and birds accelerated as railroads connected the interior of the continent with markets. Hunting buffalo in the Great Plains became an industry, so systematic and efficient that, had it not been for the early establishment of a couple sanctuary areas in Yellowstone National Park and Canada, these huge wild bovines might have become extinct. The passenger pigeons, once so numerous that flocks of millions of birds would darken the sky for hours as they flew past, were hunted so aggressively that the last pigeon died in the Cincinnati Zoo in 1914. The markets for wildlife grew faster than the animal populations could reproduce. Animals and birds were hunted for food, furs, skins, and even decorations for ladies’ hats. Hunters had no scruples about killing animals and birds during breeding or nesting seasons, and their hunting not only

drastically reduced the populations of these creatures but disrupted their reproductive cycles as well—leading in some cases to extinction and in others to greatly reduced populations. The market rewarded this type of unrestrained hunting because the hunter who killed the most animals made the most money.

The vegetation of North America was also profoundly affected by a growing market-based economy. Some of the continent's vast forests were harvested and sent back to wood-scarce Europe; white pine for ship masts was an especially valued commodity in England. Later, as settlements moved westward, the vast forests of northern Michigan and Wisconsin were harvested, milled, and shipped to Chicago, as William Cronon describes in *Nature's Metropolis*. They were used to build Chicago twice (once before and once after the great fire of 1871), and lumber was shipped from there to the treeless Great Plains, allowing construction of the towns and railroads that further opened that region to settlement. As with animals, the market encouraged rapid depletion of forest resources, with no incentive for lumber companies to selectively harvest, replant logged areas, or even clean up their logging waste. Instead, once they had clear-cut all the marketable trees in a given region, they packed up their sawmills and railroads and moved on to the next stand of timber—leaving a wasteland of stumps and tree tops in their wake, fuel for the huge wildfires that swept through the logged areas.

Even natural features like land and water became linked to the market during this time period. Rivers became transportation corridors, and the completion of manmade waterways like the Erie Canal increased the range of water transportation and helped open up states like Ohio and Michigan to settlement. In the first phase of the Industrial Revolution, rivers also served as motive power for machinery. In his book *Nature Incorporated*, Theodore Steinberg describes how the Merrimac River in Massachusetts provided the power for the new factory town of Lowell, which turned cotton into cloth far more rapidly than previously used hand spindles and looms. The land itself, divided up into parcels by the metes and bounds system in New England and by the grid system farther west, became a commodity that could be sold, bought, and used for whichever economic use would make the highest profit per acre.

The capitalization of American plants, animals, and land had tragic consequences for the native peoples of the North American continent. Overharvesting of game and forests destroyed their traditional ways of life, forcing them to become more and more dependent on the European-driven economic system to make a living. Yet racism prevented the colonists, especially those of English descent, from allowing the Indians to own the land that used to be theirs or to participate as equals in the markets. Inadvertently, the European market economy, with its increased movement of people and goods between the continents, introduced a range of novel diseases, insects, and pest animals (like rats) that were devastating to the native peoples, plants, and wildlife, as Alfred Crosby highlights in *The Columbian Exchange*.

From the French fur traders who encouraged the near-eradication of the beaver to the American lumbermen who cut down vast forests to build Chicago, market-driven resource exploitation is a dominant theme in American history. The North American continent will never be the same as it was before the Europeans connected it to a global market-based economy. Vast flocks of passenger pigeons will never darken the skies again, the virgin forests of massive trees are no more, and many of the nation's rivers no longer flow free and clean. In their place, we are left with the manmade technologies to which these natural resources were sacrificed, like factory-produced clothing and other goods, transportation networks, and the labor-saving agricultural equipment that enabled urbanization on an unprecedented scale. Those who invented and promoted these technologies honestly believed that they were improving the landscape and

leaving a better world for their descendants, and their decisions have so profoundly shaped the history of the United States that it is impossible to imagine what this nation would look like now without those technologies. It's easy to criticize the wastefulness of our ancestors, but had we been in their shoes, would (or could) we have made better decisions?

- I. Introduction
- II. Animals
 - A. Fur trade
 - B. Bison
 - C. Passenger pigeons
- III. Plants—logging
- IV. Rivers and land
- V. Conclusion