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Conservation and "Fur Deserts:" Hudson's Bay Company Land Management Strategies in the Pacific Northwest, 1821-1845

Ogden in the Snake

On November 19, 1828, Peter Skene Ogden wrote in his journal that his party of Hudson's Bay Company trappers had advanced 10 miles up a tributary of the Owyhee River, eventually setting up camp along the banks beside an abandoned Native American village. Later in the day, trappers returned with 58 beaver, a successful harvest compared to previous days on the desert creeks and streams. Eventually, a party of 150 Native Americans approached Ogden's camp, trading 10 beaver. "On our arrival, they took us for a war party but are now convinced we war only on the beaver. They annoy us and have stolen two traps. By following us they make the beaver very wild."¹ Ogden's 1828-1829 journal details how strenuous and at times violent HBC expeditions in the Snake River Country could be. Two days later, after harvests of 60 and 52 beaver, the party meets three "Snake Indians" from Twin Falls who relay the story of six Americans killed in an ambush there two months previously. After a night of bad weather, one of his trappers grows dangerously ill; two other HBC men remain with him as he almost certainly expires while Ogden's party moves on toward Salt Lake, enduring some new hardship each day.²

Between 1821 and the early 1840s, the HBC conducted these costly and dangerous expeditions despite the fact that Snake Country beaver were worth much less than their northern counterparts. Their intentions were not directly linked to profit, nor were they attempting to seize territory from the Native Americans of the Snake. Just as the Natives assume in Ogden's account,

¹ Peter Skene Ogden, "Journal of Peter Skene Ogden; Snake Expedition, 1828-1829." *The Quarterly of the Oregon Historical Society* (1910): 385-386.

² *Ibid*, 385-387.

they were at war with the beaver; or, as journals written by Ogden and other HBC expedition leaders imply, "the trappers intended to 'ruin' the rivers and streams" of the Snake.³ These expeditions figure more broadly into a tumultuous period in the HBC's history, in which the beaver populations of their eastern and northern strongholds were found to have been severely depleted due to overhunting. Facing an uncertain future marked by profit loss, intense competition, and the threats posed by American expansion, the HBC experimented with a series of land and resource management policies aimed at maintaining the health of their enterprise. Beginning in 1821, the company conducted some of the first resource conservation efforts in North American history, hoping that they would reverse the damage done by years of overhunting.⁴ These efforts yielded underwhelming results, and the HBC came to rely more heavily on their simultaneous "fur desert" policy to the south and east of the Columbia River. The opposite of conservation, this policy sought to hunt the Snake River beaver to near extinction, imposing scarcity on a region that would act as a buffer between HBC territory in the Pacific Northwest and American settlers and the competition they would bring.⁵ These policies would fail to preserve the HBC's dominance in the Pacific Northwest, and the entire fur trade would continue to decline. However, the policies did prove impactful for a time on the dynamics of the political, social, and natural worlds of the Columbia River region.

Conservation

The period between 1763 and 1821 brought great increases in the scale and intensity of the fur trade in the North American West, as the rivalry between the HBC and the North West Company

³ Jennifer Ott, "'Ruining' the Rivers in the Snake Country: The Hudson's Bay Company's Fur Desert Policy", *Oregon Historical Quarterly* (2003): 179.

⁴ Richard Somerset Mackie, *Trading Beyond the Mountains: The British Fur Trade on the Pacific, 1793-1843*, (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1997): 246-247.

⁵ *Ibid*, 259.

pressured each company to expand their territory and rate of harvest. Other factors transformed the fur trade during this era: the introduction of steel traps allowed trappers to work much more efficiently, increasing the supply of beaver pelts; roughly coinciding with this was the rising popularity of silk hats on the European market.⁶ By the time that the HBC and the North West Company merged in 1821, "whole territories had been laid waste and the resource base of the fur trade, and the food supplies of the Indians, had been seriously undermined in many sections."⁷ The HBC now dealt in a scarce commodity experiencing decreased demand as tastes shifted away from expensive beaver hats.

Given the scale of the crisis, George Simpson and other HBC administrators realized that new measures to regulate trapping were needed:

The country is without doubt, in many ways exhausted in valuable furs, yet not to such a low ebb as has generally been supposed and by extending the trade in some parts and nursing others, our prospects are by no means unfavourable.⁸

The merger between the HBC and North West Company allowed for a refocusing of beaver trapping from overharvested regions such as British Columbia's Mackenzie River district to previously inaccessible regions including the Columbia River and coastal areas of the Oregon Territory, home to healthier, albeit less desirable, beaver populations. In British Columbia, the HBC shifted trading posts from areas where beaver were scarce, and imposed stricter regulations on European trappers in these areas. They also sought to exert influence over Native American trappers throughout Western Canada, with varying degrees of success in pressuring them to hunt muskrat and other fur-bearing animals instead.⁹

⁶ *Ibid*, 246.

⁷ Arthur J. Ray, "Some Conservation Strategies of the Hudson's Bay Company, 1821-50," *Journal of Historical Geography* (1975): 50.

⁸ Quoted in *Ibid*, 51.

⁹ *Ibid*, 52-53

Another strategy that Simpson considered was limiting the number of beaver harvested in all regions in order to allow populations to regenerate over the course of a year. Simpson's advisors supplied him with an optimistic mathematical model of a hypothetical district showing how beaver populations could be artificially increased through a restrained approach to hunting. The model compares a seven-year period without conservation with the same period with conservation methods in place:

If the district produced 1,200 pelts annually without depleting stocks, this would yield 8,400 pelts for export. If the conservation policy were implemented, restricting the harvest to 400 pelts for each of the first two years, 600 the following, 800 the next, 2,800 in the fifth year, 14,000 in the sixth, and 20,000 in the seventh year, the total harvest would be 39,000 pelts with 38,800 animals remaining in the district.¹⁰

Although this strategy appealed to Simpson and other leaders, implementation suffered due to a number of factors. Just as native trappers could not always be pressured to hunt muskrat instead of beaver, they were similarly resistant to the HBC's insistence on this method of conservation, especially in areas where the HBC did not have a monopoly. Conflicting company policy discouraged HBC trappers from hunting in moderation: the HBC operated on a system of prestige and a hyper-masculine culture in which trappers were rewarded for harvesting heroic amounts of beaver, and their pensions were tied to the profit they generated. While trappers were aware of and sometimes persuaded by new conservation policy, they consistently ignored it when they returned to the field.¹¹ Officials too ignored this, concerned more for the short-term gains of their individual posts than the long-term health of the industry. Lastly, Beaver populations could only be artificially increased to a certain number, far lower than Simpson's advisors estimates, determined by the finite resources of a beaver habitat. Historian Richard Mackie points out that naturalists at the time had no concept of wildlife demography, which

¹⁰ Lorne Hammond, "Marketing Wildlife: The Hudson's Bay Company and the Pacific Northwest, 1821-49," *Forest and Conservation History* (1993): 20.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

would only begin to be studied in the 1930s, and therefore believed that with little human intervention, beaver populations would increase with few bounds.¹²

From 1821 on, the HBC tested numerous other conservation strategies, including limitations on killing males until they were fully grown, phasing out the use of steel traps and castorum in hunting, and strict quotas, especially in the summer when beavers produced less desirable pelts. American and native trappers undermined these policies wherever the HBC did not possess a monopoly, dooming conservation in overhunted regions where competition was fierce.¹³ Problems arose in the newly accessible Oregon Territory based out of Fort Vancouver, where the HBC hoped they could offset losses due to overhunting and conservation in Canada with intense harvest further south. For a time, the company's Columbia Department was successful, harvesting 20,000 pelts in 1831 and peaking with 28,949 pelts in 1833.¹⁴ Work in Oregon could be difficult, particularly as trappers encountered native tribes uninterested in or resistant to collaboration with the HBC to the extent that tribes further north. Under the leadership of John McLoughlin, trapping parties began to expand further south along the Oregon Coast and into California, where many tribes existed in relative isolation. Contact led to conflict, at times taking the form of violent mercantile conquest. In 1832, an HBC party arrived in Yaquina Bay, where the Yaquina People feared that they may introduce tuberculosis, and did not recognize the HBC's rights to harvest beaver and exploit natural resources. A conflict ensued in which two trappers were killed; in such cases the HBC exercised a retaliation policy that permitted the killing of innocents, encouraging the trappers to respond by massacring an unknown number of Yaquina, likely scores. The Yaquina remembered this event to be

¹² Mackie, *Trading Beyond the Mountains*, 247.

¹³ *Ibid*, 246-247.

¹⁴ Hammond, "Marketing Wildlife," 20.

apocalyptic, signaling the end of their sovereignty, while for the HBC such clashes were almost routine.¹⁵

The HBC's conservation-era expansion in present-day Oregon would be scaled down by the end of the decade, and Simpson considered complete withdrawal from their Columbia River posts in 1841. Historians disagree over why Simpson decided to pull out: Mackie credits the influx of Americans on the Oregon trail, who had previously failed to establish a competitive commercial presence in the Pacific Northwest but now had a substantial settler population;¹⁶ Lorne Hammond suggests that the declining popularity of the Beaver hat was the turning point.¹⁷ Conservation policies in the 20 years prior had inflicted severe overharvesting on parts of the Willamette Valley and Oregon Coast, while land east of the Cascades would be devastated by the “fur desert” policy.

The Fur Desert

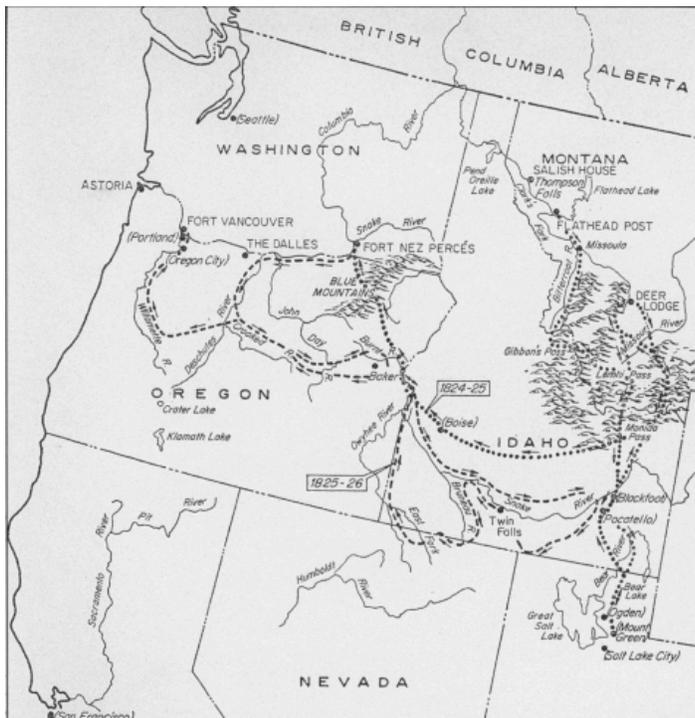
¹⁵ R. Scott Byram, "Colonial Power and Indigenous Justice: Fur Trade Violence and its Aftermath in Yaquina Narrative," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* (2008).

¹⁶ Mackie, *Trading Beyond the Mountains*, 258-259.

¹⁷ Hammond, "Marketing Wildlife," 20-21.

Beginning in 1821, Simpson could sense that it was only a matter of time before a flood of

Snake River Expeditions, 1824-26



American settlers would rush over the Rockies and into the Pacific Northwest. Some of his colleagues believed that Americans would naturally settle south of the Columbia River, which many interpreted as the border between Britain and the United States. However, negotiations between Britain and the U.S. over territory and Simpson's own instincts told him that Americans would

Source: Ott, "Ruining' The Rivers of the Snake River Country."

push on further north and west, into the rich beaver reserves over which the HBC had a monopoly and the ocean ports they relied on for export.¹⁸ As they expanded into the Columbia region, many HBC officers expressed that the arid Columbia Plateau and Snake River County was "a forlorn hope," and advised that the HBC withdraw from these areas.¹⁹ However, Simpson saw in the Snake an opportunity to gain the upper hand in this territorial dispute and simultaneously achieve modest to substantial profits. Trapping parties would undertake a scorched earth approach to harvesting beaver along the Snake and its many tributaries, hunting the beaver near to extinction. Simpson hoped to transform the Snake into a "fur desert," a wasteland in the sense that the land would be exhausted of commodities, thereby discouraging American settlers from adventuring into the Snake and beyond to the Willamette Valley.

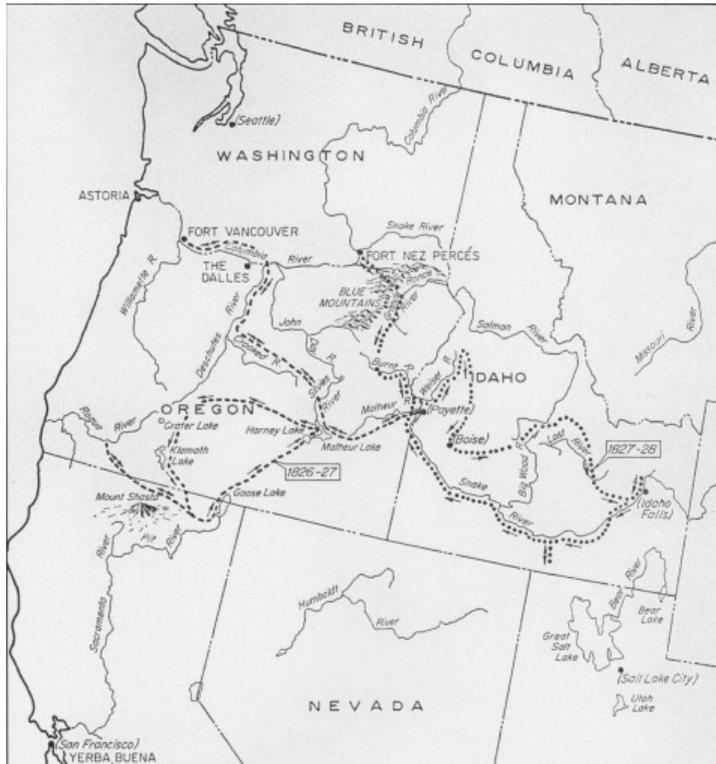
¹⁸ Mackie, *Trading Beyond the Mountains*, 259.

¹⁹ Frederick Merk, "Snake Country Expedition, 1824-25," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* (1934): 94.

Furthermore, Simpson believed that a "fur desert" would sufficiently unnerve American trappers from engaging in the Beaver trade; in this respect the policy succeeded, and Americans shifted

focus to the buffalo robe trade.²⁰

Snake River Expeditions, 1826-28



Expansion into the Snake required that the HBC negotiate land rights with Native tribes they had not previously engaged with. The Shoshone refused to participate in fur trade activity, as they already grew their own tobacco and inhabited a complex native trade network that expanded west to the Dalles and as far south as Taos, New Mexico. The Nez Percés and other tribes initially resisted the HBC's establishing

Source: Ott, "Ruining' The Rivers of the Snake River Country."

trading posts along the Columbia and Snake Rivers. At Kettle Falls, they granted Europeans rights to trap while prohibiting salmon fishing; at Fort Nez Percés, they demanded that the Company pay for trees used as building materials. Donald Mackenzie, an official first in the North West Company and then with the HBC, eventually struck a verbal agreement that allowed the Nez Percés to retain ownership of the land while giving European trappers use rights.

²⁰ Francis Backhouse, *Once They Were Hats: In Search of the Mighty Beaver*, (Toronto: ECW Press, 2015): 85.

Simpson upheld this agreement, insisting that beyond settlements at their posts, the HBC was only interested in trapping beaver.²¹

Even as they respected native land ownership, HBC use rights permitted them to manage the land and its resources in a highly destructive manner that left some parts of the Snake unrecognizable. Ogden and other trappers' "war on the beaver" achieved a noticeable impact even in the first two years of the policy: "On the Bitterroot River in September 1824, Ogden wrote that 'this part of the country tho' once abounding in Beaver is entirely ruined.'"²² By 1831, McLoughlin determined that many tributaries of the Snake had been exhausted of Beaver to the extent that trapping parties should no longer bother with them. Simpson declared his policy a success, as by the early 1840s Beaver were scarce in many parts of the Snake Country, Americans had not established successful posts along the Columbia and had instead settled a comfortable distance from the Snake to the east and south. Other than the skill and ambition of the trappers, other factors led to the beaver's demise. As trapping mainly occurred during the winter, lodges were left without mature, protective beavers to maintain dams and habitat, and hunted females left kits that would almost certainly perish. Environmental factors also contributed: the Snake recorded higher temperatures and drought between 1820 and 1840, and wildfires swept through beaver habitat. The effects of drought and higher water temperatures likely would have discouraged beavers from repopulating many ponds after overhunting had taken place.²³

The HBC did not keep a record of how the landscape of the Snake changed due to its "fur desert" policy, but it is likely that the absence of beaver devastated some of the once rich riparian

²¹ Ott, "'Ruining' the Rivers in the Snake Country," 168-174.

²² *Ibid*, 179

²³ *Ibid*, 179-183.

habitats of the watershed. As a keystone species, beaver create and maintain habitat that many other species rely on. As Jennifer Ott notes:

After the fur desert, however, the water ran differently, large mammal forage was sustained differently, water tables were maintained differently, and creatures that lived in beaver ponds had to find new bodies of water to call home.²⁴

Much of the Snake and its tributaries flow through arid desert, and beavers' geomorphic activity provided oases that held food and habitat that nurtured fish, birds and mammals. Beaver dams also contributed to overall water quality, keeping silt from being eroded from riverbanks. When beaver were overhunted their dams did not fail immediately, but once they did they would have altered the course and landscapes of rivers and streams significantly. The trappers themselves relied on the richness of beaver habitats during their expeditions, which provided dependable sources of game and forage for horses and provided refuge between the long and hostile expanses of open country. Native Americans would have likely suffered in the long term due to this devastation, had they not ultimately been displaced by American expansion.²⁵

Conclusion

Just as conservation measures could not prevent the fur trade's ultimate decline, the "fur desert's" initial successes could not stem the tide of Manifest Destiny. The "fur desert" prevented American fur companies from establishing posts along the Snake and Columbia, but it had done little to discourage American missionaries from entering, who laid the groundwork for further settlement. By the mid-1840s, just a year or two before the Oregon Trail's epoch years, many within the HBC conceded that they could no longer keep settlers from entering the Oregon Country, and company employees now profited more from escorting American settlers than

²⁴ *Ibid*, 191.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 188-191.

harvesting beaver.²⁶ American settler-colonialism introduced a new ethic of land management to the valleys west of the Cascades, different from the HBC's in ways subtle and profound:

Fur traders may have shared with settlers a commodified view of nature and extracted a "resource" from the land, but fur society did not try to possess or make over the land itself. Rather, fur trappers adapted to the patterns of the land in order to kill beaver and otter. Settlers, too, made adaptations to the environment but, to a far greater degree than their predecessors, they recast the place.²⁷

Trappers certainly impacted the landscape, ruining much of it from the fur trade perspective, but they inhabited a different way of relating to the land than American settlers, who first plowed fields and then built towns and cities. Settlers, largely unaware of the land-use regimes of Native Americans first and then of the HBC that shaped the landscape, believed the deserts to the east to be a wasteland and the Willamette Valley an edenic paradise. Nowhere in their narratives was the HBC's intervention, whose land management strategies altered the landscape for generations through the devastation of a single species.

²⁶ Mackie, *Trading Beyond the Mountains*, 259.

²⁷ Robert Bunting, "The Environment and Settler Society in Western Oregon," *Pacific Historical Review* (1995): 414.