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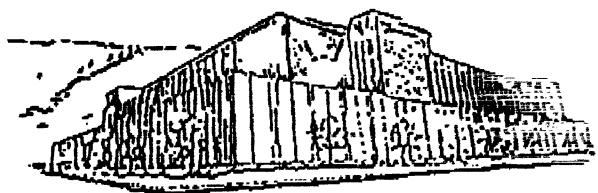
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CLEARING THE COUNTRY:
A HISTORY OF THE HUDSON'S BAY COMPANY'S
FUR DESERT POLICY

by

Jennifer Susan Ott

B.A. The University of Washington, 1993

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

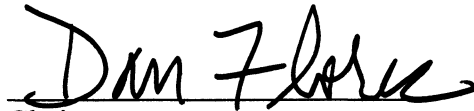
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Clearing the Country: A History of the Hudson's Bay Company's Fur Desert Policy (127 pp.)

Advisor: Dan Flores

DZF

In the 1820s and 1830s, the Hudson's Bay Company worked to maintain its holdings north of the Columbia River in Oregon Territory without violating the joint occupation agreement Britain had signed with the United States. One Company response to the Americans' impending encroachment into the territory, the fur desert policy, directed its employees to trap out the furbearing animals, principally beaver, from the Snake River region, making it economically unattractive to the Americans. The Company wanted to create a buffer zone between American territory and the beaver preserves in New Caledonia (now British Columbia).

Nine Snake Country Expeditions, between 1824 and 1831, form the core of the fur desert policy. The Expeditions covered the area that now encompasses parts of Idaho, Montana, Oregon, Utah, Nevada, and California. Prior trapping expeditions by the North West Company, native people's trapping activities, and, possibly, environmental conditions aided in the policy's success. Beaver reproductive biology further abetted the policy's goals.

The consequences of the fur desert policy have not been discussed or analyzed in fur trade or Company histories. Using studies of the beaver's role in ecosystems, traders' and explorers' journals, and the historical record of native communities' activities in the decades surrounding the policy, a picture of the environmental and cultural consequences can be sketched.

While beaver removal did not destroy either the environment or the cultures of Snake Country, it contributed to the environmental degradation of the region seen today, and may have provided one of the catalysts for cultural change on the Columbia Plateau. As a result of the reduced amount of beaver activity in the region, species abundance and diversity most likely declined. Over time, continued trapping pressure and habitat reduction caused by agriculture and ranching exacerbated the consequences of beaver removal. Concurrently, Northern Shoshone, Northern Bannock, Cayuse, and Nez Perce shifted their subsistence activities. Further study is needed to determine the exact connection between the fur desert policy and cultural change, but it most certainly played a role.

Preface

I am deeply indebted to Brad Ott, Professor Dan Flores, and my fellow graduate students at the University of Montana. Working with them brought my thinking, writing, and appreciation of history to a higher level and made graduate school at Montana a unique and unforgettable experience. Thank you also to the other members of my committee, Professors Bill Farr and Len Broberg. I appreciate your time and challenging questions that made me reconsider some of my preconceived notions.

I would like also to thank the many people who met and corresponded with me about the people and environment of Snake Country, and the Hammond Fund at the University of Montana for the funding I received for research expenses.

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Introduction

Sitting in the middle of a ponderosa pine forest, at the edge of the Columbia Gorge (out of sight of any of the dams), or down in the midst of a sagebrush prairie on the Snake River Plains, it is easy to forget the fundamental environmental changes that have occurred in the Northwest in the last 200 years. Human influence on the land here long precedes the nineteenth century, of course, but the scale and consequences of human action in the Northwest, as elsewhere, increased dramatically with the Europeans' entry into the region in the early nineteenth century. The first relatively long-term Euro-American residents in the region, the North West Company and the Hudson's Bay Company employees, came here for the beaver. They were not interested in the land itself and they did not concern themselves with the local communities other than as sources of pelts, horses, or sustenance in times of need. The trappers embodied the capitalist ethos in their focus on only doing and learning that which would help them gain more pelts. They were the start of a long line of people, products of the societies from which they came, who saw the natural resources as commodities to be extracted for outside consumption and gain.

The lumber from these ponderosa and other forests brought people and capital to the Northwest. They are, along with almost any other forest around here, different today in the average age of the trees, the diversity of plant and animal species, and the population size of any animals living among them. Logging practices have altered the

habitat so as to favor different species. Hunting pressure increased exponentially as more and more Euro-Americans settled the area in the late 1800s.¹

The Columbia River's ability to transport goods brought attention to it first as a possible outlet of the ever-elusive Northwest Passage and later for its ability to generate power. Existing on a whole different scale of size and time, the river does not seem to be obliged to bend to peoples' desires. But it has been turned into one reservoir after another. The recent decline in salmon is truly alarming and what the river was before it became a "thing" to be put to work for people has been lost. If the human impact on this river continues as it has in the past, it will soon be nothing more than a canal surrounded by beautiful scenery.

Prior to the lumbering years and the multitude of dams on the Columbia, the Snake River provided a route to another commodity: beaver pelts. Snake Country, the area surrounding the Snake, Columbia, and several other drainage systems, bore the brunt of the first blow dealt by the market economy in the Northwest - the fur trade. As a consequence, the ecosystem here lost biodiversity, water quality, erosion control, and wildlife habitat. The fur trade's history in the Snake Country is particularly interesting because it represents a long era of Euro-American attitudes toward the western United States in microcosm and in the extreme.

In 1824, George Simpson, field governor for the Hudson's Bay Company (hereafter HBC), began to develop the Columbia District (what is now Washington, Oregon, and parts of Idaho and Montana) into a profitable and well-established outpost for the Company. Economic benefit for the Company provided a catalyst to this initiative.

Political necessity for the British government in their dispute over the “Oregon Question” with the Americans may have also played a part. By 1824, despite a joint occupation convention signed in 1818, both Britain and the United States were anxious for a more certain establishment of their own claims to the region. The British wanted to clarify their claim south at least to the Columbia River and the Americans wanted to push the British back to the 49th parallel. One Company response to this question of claims, what has been since named the fur desert policy, emanated from George Simpson and directed HBC trapping parties to clear furbearing animals from the Snake River region. The policy is an example of a level of international relations, which, while attempting to repel Americans, directly affected the environment and the local inhabitants -- native, British, and American.

Wanting to retain their monopoly and to continue to have access to the Columbia River for transporting goods, the Hudson’s Bay Company resisted American occupation and claim to the Oregon Country. The Company repelled American trappers’ entry into the fur trade in the Oregon Country through a variety of strategies. These ranged from general intimidation and alliances with Indian bands to undermining fur prices by accepting fewer pelts than the Americans for trade goods. In addition to these standard fur trade practices, the Hudson’s Bay Company also attempted to create a “fur desert” in Snake Country, the region extending south and southeast of the Columbia District into what is now parts of Oregon, Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, Utah, and Northern California.

Six Snake Country Expeditions were organized between 1824 and 1830 to carry out the fur desert policy. Additional expeditions went out in the 1830’s, but they had less

impact on the region, largely because those in the 1820's had succeeded in trapping out the beaver. Peter Skene Ogden led each of these trapping expeditions in the 1820's, save for Alexander Ross' 1823-1824 trip, which had both economic and political purposes. Because Hudson's Bay Company's officials had resigned themselves to losing the territory south of the Columbia River eventually, they resolved to obtain the maximum number of pelts from the region before the American trappers and settlers overran it. This extensive trapping would create the fur desert in which there were no fur-bearing animals in the area between the American claim on the east side of the Rockies and the Hudson's Bay Company lands on the western side, thereby establishing a buffer zone between the competition (Americans) and themselves. This hopefully would discourage American trappers from entering the Northern Rockies and the Columbia District. As long as the HBC continued trapping in the Columbia District, they wanted to eliminate competition, even if they could not prevent American settlement. Two centuries of competition with French fur traders and then the North West Company across the continent had created this attitude towards other interested parties.

Interestingly, the consequences of this fur desert policy are not discussed or analyzed in fur trade or Hudson's Bay Company histories, probably due to the shift in attention to American settlement in the territorial dispute. The Snake Country Expeditions effectively ended in 1832 when the beaver populations failed in Snake Country and the British government focused on a higher level of international relations. However, environmental and social historians have yet to examine this rather infamous event in early Western history. An analysis of the policy reveals insights into human

interaction between cultural groups and social classes in the Hudson's Bay Company.

Moreover, such an examination shows how international politics and the introduction of the market economy into the Pacific Northwest severely disrupted the Snake River Country's ecology and the subsistence systems of those living upon it.

The fur desert policy demonstrates how far fur-trapping companies were willing to go in their exploitation of nature and it provides a window into other aspects of the fur trade. Because of the diplomatic nature of the dispute, the policy reveals something of the nature of the Company's relationship with the British government. The HBC held a monopoly charter granted by the Crown in 1670. Through the charter, the Company operated as a monopoly in the Columbia District. Company officials were government officials in that they maintained the judicial system in the region and they regulated activities, such as trade and settlement. In short, they provided all the functions of a colonial or territorial government. The government in Britain remained aloof from but aware of the HBC's policies in the Northwest because of domestic and international issues. That the Crown did not stop the fur desert policy indicates implicit approval of the tactic.²

Examining the fur desert policy also provides an opportunity to pose questions regarding gender and race relations in the fur trade. These include not only which jobs or tasks each group performed, but also how gender and race influenced the level of success of the trade. What has long been considered largely in terms of British men conquering the wilderness needs to be reviewed in light of the incredible diversity of people working in the region. To view the HBC and their activities in the Oregon Country only from the

officers' perspective limits our knowledge. The Expeditions included men and women who were from the British, American, Iroquois, Flathead, Hawaiian, Orkneymen, Métis and probably other ethnic groups. Additionally, local people actively or indirectly participated in or resisted the fur trade. All of these people worked and lived in Oregon Country and they changed culturally and economically in response to their work.

The environment is included in my thesis because the fur desert policy rested on a particular environment's desirable resources. The policy also fundamentally altered that environment. Beaver ecology partially determined the success of the fur desert policy. As a consequence of the policy, beaver numbers declined to near extirpation, which had numerous effects on the physical nature of the environment. The fur desert's consequences continue to today. Beaver populations in the states that encompass Snake Country today have never fully rebounded from the fur trade generally and particularly from the fur desert. This has affected streamflow and hydrological systems, as well as the lifeways of native populations and more recent Euro-American arrivals.

Finally, what does this policy say about British relations with the land, in contrast to both native and American views of the place? What led them to such a radical policy? What connection does it have with earlier and later Euro-American activities in the region? Each of these questions needs to be considered from the perspective that Oregon Country was not home and held no attachment for the British and that made it possible for them to exploit the region for as much resource wealth as possible. It is the difference between a region's being simply space and one's being a place to the people living and working there.

Histories of the Hudson's Bay Company during the 1820's abound. The company's history holds significance for Americans because this era produced the debate over the "Oregon Question." The British and Canadians identify with that significance and add their interest in the Hudson's Bay Company's fate in the region and in the distinctive, and sometimes distinguished, people who participated in the Snake Country Expeditions. None of the studies focuses on the fur desert policy itself.

One of the most important sources for the study of the Columbia District during Simpson's tenure is *Fur Trade and Empire: George Simpson's Journal*, edited by Frederick Merk. Merk focuses on the 1824-1825 journals and his introduction provides some cursory background for these years. He makes reference to part of the Snake Country Expeditions' purpose but he does not focus on the fur desert policy.³

Other works on the Hudson's Bay Company and the fur trade also mention but do not dwell on the policy. Richard Ruggles' *A Country So Interesting: The Hudson's Bay Company and Two Centuries of Mapping, 1670-1870* (1991), Ray Allen Billington's *Westward Expansion: A History of the American Frontier* (1949), Hiram Chittenden's *The American Fur Trade of the Far West* (1935), and Daniel Francis' *The Battle for the West: Fur Traders and the Birth of Western Canada* (1982), all describe the policy and its intents. It is difficult to determine if these historians dismiss the fur desert policy because they lacked an interest in ecological manipulations or because American settlement made the policy a moot point by the 1830's and 1840's. David J. Wishart's *The Fur Trade of the American West, 1807-1840: A Geographical Synthesis*, describes

the fur desert policy in more detail than other historians and discusses possible ecological factors and implications.⁴

From the American diplomatic perspective on the “Oregon Question,” the discussion is not significantly more complete. Frederick Merk’s *Manifest Destiny and Mission in America History: A Reinterpretation* (1963) mentions a depletion of furs and competition with the British, causing the decline of the American fur trade in Oregon in the 1820’s and 1830’s. His other book on the subject, *Albert Gallatin and the Oregon Problem: A Study in Anglo-American Diplomacy* (1950) explains the fur desert policy as part of British actions in the Oregon Territory during negotiations to renew the joint occupation convention.⁵

Although I have found no works on the fur desert policy itself, there are several by and about the Hudson’s Bay Company employees and the Indian trappers who participated in the expeditions. Among these are Gloria Griffin Cline’s *Peter Skene Ogden and the Hudson’s Bay Company* (1974), *Peter Skene Ogden: Fur Trader* (1967) by Archie Binns, Alexander Ross’ *The Fur Hunters of the Far West* (1956), and Lewis O. Saum’s *The Fur Trader and the Indian* (1965). Focusing on women’s roles in the fur trade, Sylvia Van Kirk’s “*Many Tender Ties*”: *Women in Fur-Trade Society, 1670-1870* (1980) and Jennifer S. H. Brown’s *Strangers in Blood* speak generally to this topic. The Métis culture that developed in the Pacific Northwest is the topic of John C. Jackson’s *Children of the Fur Trade* (1996). None of these explains the course or consequences of the policy, but they do provide helpful and useful insight into the structure, development, and activities of the Expeditions.⁶

The focus thus far in works regarding the Columbia District fur trade and the Hudson's Bay Company has been on the expedition leaders and the higher level diplomatic relations between England and the United States. These texts pay very little attention to any ecological impact caused by the fur desert policy, or to the prevailing attitudes towards nature that enabled such a policy to be formed. Furthermore, they neglect gender and class issues to a large extent. It appears, in short, that historians note the existence of the policy but have not examined it in detail.

The organizing scheme I will use to explain and show the implications of the fur desert policy relates to the purpose for this project. The Snake Country Expeditions reflect the nature of the North American fur trade and of international economic, political, and diplomatic relations. Through my thesis I will use the connection between the events, institutions, and ideas developed outside Oregon Territory and the fur desert policy to demonstrate how the policy was a product of the larger context. For example, the boundary dispute between Great Britain and the United States led to a situation in which the HBC could choose to help Great Britain keep the territory and to make decisions with their own profits and advantage in mind, rather than with any regard for the future state of the Snake Country environment. This situation made the very idea of a fur desert policy possible. It would not make sense on land that belonged indisputably to the Company and from which competition had been excluded, such as New Caledonia, what is now British Columbia.

The same connection holds true for the social relations that characterized the Oregon Country trade. The strict hierarchy between classes of employees, the racial or ethnic divisions between these classes, and the periphery status of women all carry over from other sectors of the trade. Across Canada, the HBC maintained strict class and gender divisions. In the Snake River Expeditions, as elsewhere, this type of social system included both positive and negative consequences for the HBC. The Expeditions succeeded in large part because the social structure maintained order and efficiency, as with their use of women's labor. However, maintaining a social hierarchy requires an underclass, the Métis freemen, who resisted their inferior status. They defected to American trapping companies, resisted rules regarding their behavior, especially those that applied to trading with local Indians for horses, refused at times to follow Peter Skene Ogden's directions to follow him into hostile territory, and generally made life difficult for Ogden.

Finally, the status of the West in general and the Northwest in particular as a resource supplier for Europe and the East Coast begins with the fur trade carried out by the British. The Company had no interest in settling the region or developing a society there, a disadvantage to them in the territorial dispute. Instead, they saw the region as a source of raw materials with which they could develop their own wealth and that of English citizens in Europe. This attitude defined their purpose in establishing themselves in the West and determined how they would manage the harvest of the natural resources. This relationship between the West and the rest of the world had consequences not only for the land but also for the people living on the land. The policy disrupted native

communities' subsistence systems both as a result of trapping out the beaver and through their economic relations with the British.

Mention beavers to an urban dweller today and the response invariably reflects their frustration with how the rodents block culverts, chew through wires, and outwit many a clever attempt to exclude them from backyard creeks and roadside ditches. But out in the hinterlands, people have begun ever so slowly to welcome beaver back to areas where their dams can reverse damage done by farming, mining, and grazing. Over the last few years the beaver have regained some of their pre-fur trade populations levels and people have rediscovered their role in the ecosystems of Snake Country. Few, if any, of these people understand the relatively recent increase in beaver populations as the latest stage in a sequence set off by the fur desert policy. Likewise, George Simpson, governor of the HBC in North America, probably did not consider the future consequences of the Snake Country Expeditions. Who would guess the small, pudgy, sedentary beaver would be the center of so much activity and change?

Notes

¹ Nancy Langston, *Forest Dreams, Forest Nightmares: The Paradox of Old Growth in the Inland West* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995): 20-24, 79-80.

² Reginald C. Stuart, *United States Expansionism and British North America, 1775-1871* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988): 79.; Frederick Merk, *The Oregon Question: Essays in Anglo-American Diplomacy and Politics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 31.

³ Frederick Merk, ed., *Fur Trade and Empire: George Simpson's Journal* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press: 1931): xxvi, 49-75.

⁴ Richard I. Ruggles, *A Country So Interesting: The Hudson's Bay Company and Two Centuries of Mapping, 1670-1870* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991).; Ray Allen Billington, *Westward Expansion: A History of the American Frontier* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1949).; Hiram Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West*, 2 vols. (New York: The Press of the Pioneers, Inc., 1935).; Daniel Francis, *The Battle for the West and the Birth of Western Canada* (Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1982).; David J. Wishart, *The Fur Trade of the American West, 1807-1840: A Geographical Synthesis* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979).

⁵ Frederick Merk with the collaboration of Lois Bannister Merk, *Manifest Destiny and Mission in American History: A Reinterpretation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963).; Frederick Merk, *Albert Gallatin and the Oregon Question: A Study in Anglo-American Diplomacy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950).

⁶ Gloria Griffin Cline, *Peter Skene Ogden and the Hudson's Bay Company* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1974).; Archie Binns, *Peter Skene Ogden: Fur Trader* (Portland, OR: Binfords and Mort, 1967).; Alexander Ross, *The Fur Hunters of the Far West*, ed. Kenneth A. Spaulding (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1956).; Lewis O. Saum, *The Fur Trader and the Indian* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1965).; Sylvia Van Kirk, "*Many Tender Ties*": *Women in Fur Trade Society, 1670-1870* (Winnipeg: Watson and Dwyer Publishing Ltd., 1980).; Jennifer S. H. Brown, *Strangers in Blood: Fur Trade Company Families in Indian Country* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1980).; John C. Jackson, *Children of the Fur Trade: Forgotten Métis of the Pacific Northwest* (Missoula, MT: Mountain Press Publishing Company, 1996).

Chapter One

“If properly managed no question exists that it would yield handsome profits as we have convincing proof that the country is a rich preserve of Beaver and which for political reasons we should endeavor to destroy as fast as possible.”

- George Simpson, Governor of the Northern Department of Hudson’s Bay Company¹

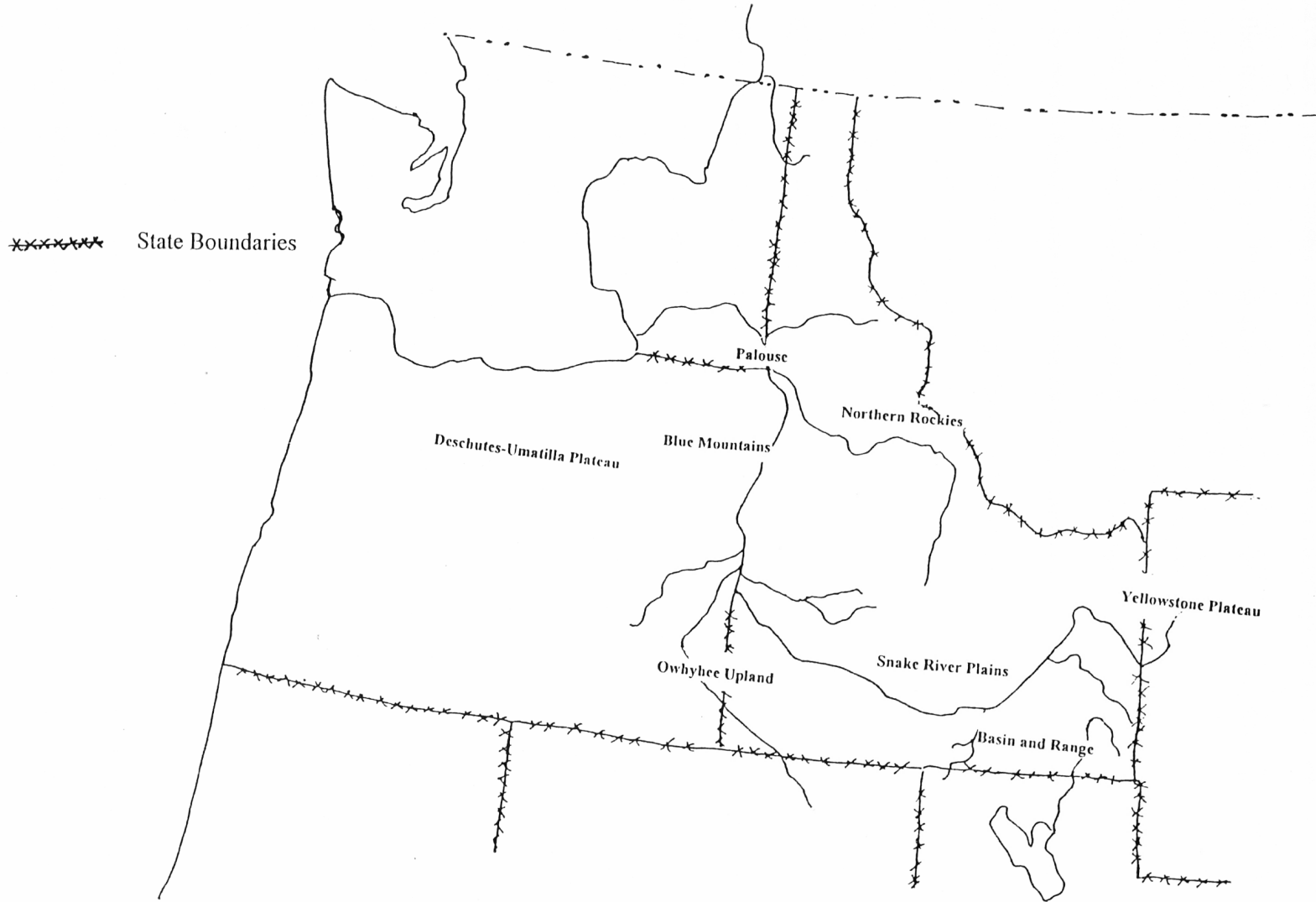
“A melancholy and strange-looking country - one of fracture, and violence, and fire.”

- John C. Fremont, American explorer²

Peter Skene Ogden, chief factor of the Snake Country Expeditions in the latter half of the 1820s, spared no complaint in his journal entries describing the landscape he traversed. If his surrounding merited any mention it usually resembled his remarks made near the confluence of Burnt Creek and the Snake River: “Indeed a more Gloomy Barren looking Country I have never yet seen.”³ Or, more often, he might mention the number of beaver to be expected according to the vegetation of an area.

Ogden’s focus on beaver and on moving through the country quickly caused him to mistake the richly varied landscape with very little space that was truly hostile to human habitation for a wasteland. Snake Country, the landscape traversed by trappers and inhabited by numerous small communities of people in what is now primarily central and southern Idaho, southeastern Washington, and northeastern Oregon varies widely in elevation, climate, vegetation, and landforms. There are pockets of high mountains, rolling grasslands, and lava plains scattered over the area that was mostly covered with sagebrush plains when the HBC arrived in the 1820s. These widely divergent landscapes are drawn together into one region because they share in one common trait: they are all drained by the Snake-Columbia River system.

Figure 1.1. Physiographic Regions of Snake Country



Volcanic and hydrologic forces have created the Snake Country topography. Lava flows have laid layers of basalt across the plains. About 16,000 years ago, Lake Bonneville, the much larger, Pleistocene version of the Great Salt Lake, filled to its highest level, about 800 feet. It remained more or less at that height for about 1000 years until the water broke through the rock and ice holding it back at Red Rock Canyon and flooded the Snake River valley all the way to the Columbia River. The immense amount of water rushing downstream gouged the basalt and swept away soil and rock. Since this catastrophic event tributaries to the Snake and Columbia have continued to cut down through the basalt, in some places to such an extent the plains look wrinkled from the air.

By the time the British arrived in Snake Country it had developed into two separate but similar regions. Around the lower Snake and middle Columbia rivers, the Columbia Plateau climate predominated. The Plateau climate varied less than the Great Basin to the south and generally experienced less severe extremes of weather and climate cycles. The upper Snake Basin, what is now primarily southern Idaho, exists on the peripheries of the Plateau and the Great Basin, resulting in a drier climate that is more susceptible to the highly variable climate of the Great Basin but still buffered by the influence of the Plateau.⁴

Precipitation rates on the Plateau depend largely on elevation. Generally, the lower elevations receive less precipitation. Conversely, the higher elevations have higher rates of precipitation. The Cascade Mountains to the west capture most of the moisture moving inland from the Pacific Ocean. The mountain ranges in eastern Oregon and Idaho stop some of the remaining precipitation from escaping to the Rockies in the east, but the

valleys have to rely on the snowpack for most of their water. The lowest levels hover around ten inches per year in places such as The Dalles, at an elevation of 96 feet. The Wallowa Mountains of northeastern Oregon and the Lemhi Range of central Idaho receive approximately 60 inches per year, but their valleys and canyons average only ten to twenty inches like the Dalles.⁵

The topographical relief that influences the precipitation makes for a complex map of landforms and vegetation. East of the Cascade Mountain range, south of the Columbia River, and west of the Blue Mountains lies the Deschutes-Umatilla Plain, bounded on the south by the High Lava Plains of south-central Oregon. Its lowest points are along the Columbia River at about 250 feet and the highest is 3000 feet in the western uplands around Madras, Oregon. At lower elevations, before white Americans settled the area, tall bunchgrasses dominated. In the mountains, ponderosa pines take advantage of the greater availability of water.⁶

The Blue Mountains region encompasses valleys (such as the Nez Perce's Grande Ronde), mountains, and plateaus. The elevations range from 900 feet to almost 10,000 feet. The largest plateau, the Snake River Plateau, forms the uplands through which the Snake River cuts a mile deep canyon. Most valleys are not so abrupt, but they are deep and protected enough to get only ten inches of precipitation and only support vegetation well adapted to dry climates, such as sagebrush. Moving upward in elevation, the dominant vegetation changes in response to higher precipitation rates from sagebrush to juniper, into Douglas fir, lodgepole pine, white fir, and western larch woodlands.⁷

To the north, the Palouse Region of southeastern Washington contrasts sharply

with the Blue Mountains. These rolling hills rise only 20 to 80 feet above the surrounding plains. The area is subhumid and, prior to white settlement and agriculture, long grasses and ponderosa pine forests flourished. Today, the Palouse produce abundant crops for farmers because of their rich soil and sufficient precipitation.

Just to the west of the Palouse, in Idaho, the Snake River Plateau of the Blue Mountains gives way to the forested foothills of the Northern Rockies. The Rockies of central Idaho consist of high mountains with low valleys throughout the ranges, which include the Lemhi and Salmon ranges. The mountains, like those farther west, have subhumid higher elevations with spruce, fir, and ponderosa pines, and semiarid lowlands with sagebrush-grasslands. Three prairies in this region, the Camas Prairie, Big Camas, and Camas Meadow, provided a staple food, the camas root, to the Nez Perce, Northern Shoshone, and Bannock in the nineteenth century. Located close to the mountains, all three had a combination of good soils and adequate precipitation for camas to grow. Closer to Montana, the lower valleys become more arid, and the sagebrush-grasslands give way to sagebrush steppes.⁸

South of the Blue Mountains in the Malheur River and Boise, Idaho vicinity, the climate becomes decidedly drier and more uniform in the Owhyhee Upland. The soils are dry and support an even mix of sagebrush steppe areas and saltbrush/greasewood vegetation. Some of the higher elevations support trees, such as junipers, but these elevations are rare. The plateau is at 5000 feet, and the scattered mountains reach about 8000 feet.⁹ When Peter Skene Ogden crossed this region with his brigades of trappers he wrote, "I have only to remark a more barren Country no Christian ever traveled over."¹⁰

Similar to the Owhyhee Upland but lower in elevation and more volcanic in structure and soil type, the Eastern Snake River Plains fill a wide swath through Idaho south of the mountain ranges. Lava flows from the Cenozoic era created the 60-mile wide plains that support sagebrush steppe where enough soil has formed through erosion and some sedimentation. There still remain pockets of land where the basalt has not disappeared at all under soil and no vegetation can live.¹¹

The Snake River Plains formed part of the route people have used to travel between the Plateau and the Great Plains on foot, on horse, and in wagons, trains and cars. To early inhabitants of the basin, according to B. Robert Butler, the Snake River Plains were “a natural extension of the northwestern Plains west of the Continental Divide and...a corridor connecting the northwestern [Great] Plains area with the Intermontane area.”¹² The British quickly realized the importance of the Plains as a west-east route that would draw Euro-Americans toward the Columbia Plateau and HBC operations.

Finally, the southeastern corner of Idaho and the adjacent areas of Wyoming, Utah, and Nevada differ markedly from the Eastern Snake River Plains. In this region, the basins and ranges and the Yellowstone Plateau, the same pattern as in the Deschutes-Umatilla Plateau and the Blue Mountains prevails, with trees in the higher elevations and sagebrush and grasslands in the lowlands. Douglas fir, cedar, hemlock, spruce and fir make up the forests on the Yellowstone Plateau while the drier mountain ranges to the west have a mixture of vegetation that includes juniper woodlands, and spruce and fir forests. Between the ranges, such as the Wasatch, Albion, and Malad Mountains, which

run roughly parallel to each other, lie basins drained by the tributaries of the Snake River. Most of the vegetation of these open valleys is sagebrush steppe, but there are some areas of tall grasslands.¹³

Living in this varied landscape in the early nineteenth century meant having a rich and highly mobile existence. Prior to the presence of inland fur traders the local communities had an extensive interregional trade network to augment their already well-balanced subsistence systems. As the eighteenth century progressed, the Spanish and British cultures encountered the Columbia Plateau cultures first through trade. The cultural changes this contact brought do not seem to have been drastic. The presence of inland fur traders at Hudson's Bay Company posts put additional pressures on both the land and the people. While the fur traders and trappers were certainly agents of change, they also operated within an existing social and economic system they only partially comprehended.

A number of cultural groups lived in the region involved in the Snake Country Expeditions. The Cayuse, Nez Perce, Northern Shoshone, and Bannock lived in the areas most affected by the fur desert policy. Fur traders and explorers in the region usually mistakenly lumped the Northern Shoshone, and Bannock together as "Snakes" or "Diggers." The territory in which these communities lived covers to the two physiographic provinces discussed above - the Columbia Plateau and the periphery of the Great Basin. In response to these different climates, the people developed two similar but distinct rhythms of life.

The earliest predecessors of these people probably arrived about 11,000 years ago,

when the area held more fresh water than it does today. Then, about 6000 years ago, during a period of climate change, the Altithermal of 7500 to 4500 years ago, the area became a destination for people one author has described as “dust bowl refugees” from the Great Basin. The first Shoshonean moved north about 3700 years ago from the Southwest.¹⁴

The Plateau cultures’ utilization of resources led them to develop a sort of “hub-and-spoke” movement pattern. The Cayuse and the Nez Perce who lived on the Snake and Columbia rivers below present-day Lewiston maintained semi-permanent villages. Salmon fishing locations determined the positioning of the villages. During different seasons of resource availability, small groups of Nez Perce or Cayuse from the villages moved about the countryside to root grounds such as Camas Prairie, hunting grounds, or trading centers. They returned to the river villages for the salmon runs and winter camps. The balance in the gathering-fishing-hunting diet demonstrates the relative importance of their subsistence activities. The Nez Perce, for example, relied on plant foods for 40 to 60% of their diet, salmon for as much as 50%, and game animals for about 10 to 15%, depending on the year and where a group lived.¹⁵

The salmon runs and root gathering influenced many aspects of life on the Plateau. The villages and people who lived in them gained their names from their segment of the river, such as Kamiah. Traveling to root grounds and then gathering the camas, biscuitroot, and berries filled the summers. Furthermore, Plateau technology evolved in relation to their primary subsistence activities. Men developed weirs, knives, spears, and other fish catching and processing tools. Women fashioned digging sticks out

of a curved piece of wood with a handle attached to the top, for leverage, and containers to aid in gathering, preparing, and storing roots, stems, leaves and fruits of edible and medicinal plants. Some members of the Cayuse and Nez Perce joined Northern Shoshone and the mountain groups, such as the Salish Flatheads of the Bitterroot Valley, when they crossed the Divide for the annual bison hunt. The cultural implications and reasons for the hunt have not been entirely sorted out, as the discussion of the consequences of the fur desert policy will demonstrate.¹⁶

The salmon runs halted at Shoshone Falls, just upstream from present-day Twin Falls, Idaho. As the land sloped upward and eastward on the Snake River Plains it looked more and more like a desert as the climate became drier. Irrigated farms today obscure the desert-like landscape. Depending on where they lived, the upriver Nez Perce, Northern Shoshone, and Bannock developed variations on a balance between a reliance on roots and berries, salmon, local game animals, and bison. In the east mounted Northern Shoshone and Bannock groups in the Lemhi Mountains, near present-day Fort Hall, and in the central Snake River Plains shifted the balance the farthest away from gathering-fishing to gathering-hunting. Across the region, spring and summer activities focused on root gathering. Winters were spent hunting bison, elk, deer, antelope or mountain sheep. The toolkits that Northern Shoshone and Bannock people developed demonstrates their emphasis on gathering and hunting. As on the Plateau, women made digging sticks and containers to facilitate root gathering, processing and storing. The men carried bows, arrows, and game processing tools.¹⁷

As a result of a reduced reliance on fisheries and the semi-permanent villages they

supported, the upriver-Nez Perce, Northern Shoshone and Bannock people moved in more of a seasonal circuit. Small groups of people moved around the Snake River basin to seasonally available resources. In the winter there might be larger aggregations of people either for the bison hunt or at a campsite near good hunting grounds, but these camps had no permanency or continuity of members between or during seasons.¹⁸

Because of the high variability of campsites and members, social groups did not identify themselves or others by place so much as by how they lived. The Northern Shoshone, for example, who lived in the mountains around the Salmon River hunted big horn sheep year round were known as the Tukadika, the “meat-eaters” or “eaters of big horn sheep.” Camps on the Boise, Payette, and Weiser rivers gained the name Yahandeka, or “eaters of groundhogs.”¹⁹

There is not much evidence that any of these people needed beaver for their existence. Beaver meat is certainly edible and tribes most likely used it sporadically. Apparently, salmonids, roots, and large mammals provided enough sustenance to preclude the use of beaver for food. But the beaver could have been hunted more extensively for they lived everywhere people lived, gathered, and hunted. Only when the land offered no possibility of growing willows or another suitable wood plant did the beaver stay away completely. Because the fur desert policy severely reduced their numbers and white settlers did not encourage their rebound, no definite idea of beaver pre-contact numbers or range exists for the Snake River Basin. From the trappers’ journals it appears they reproduced successfully in all parts of the Columbia Plateau except on parts of the eastern Snake River Plains and the Owhyhee Upland in present-day

central Oregon. These lava plains lacked soil and vegetation and therefore any habitat for beaver.²⁰

Intertribal and interregional trade played an important role among the people of the Columbia Plateau. In the early nineteenth century, these groups had an extensive trade network that added variation and stability to their lifeways. Two places served as the centers of trade. One, at The Dalles on the Columbia, brought the coastal and the inland people together. Each region brought their specialties to trade. The Northern Shoshone could trade bear grass, camas roots, buffalo robes and other skins for pemmican from the Middle Columbia peoples or for metal goods from the coastal groups who had acquired from the Europeans trading on the Pacific Coast. Another trading center, in the area where the Boise, Payette and Snake rivers meet, brought Plains people together with the Plateau groups from the area west of the Divide. From the Plains, groups such as the Crow and Arapaho brought tipis, headdresses, cedar poles, parfleches, and other Plains goods. Some groups traded furs in this pre-contact network. The Cayuse sent out small groups that trapped a variety of small mammals for their furs for trade. The Cayuse linked the Plains tribes and the trading center at The Dalles.²¹

The trade network also brought the first great consequences for the Snake River tribes of the European presence in North America. After the Pueblo Revolt of 1680, the horses “transferred” to native ownership made their way northward by way of long-established trade routes. The first horses reached the Snake River Basin by 1730, possibly as early as 1700. A large number of the people adopted the horse into their lifeways. Horses brought a whole new means of measuring wealth and transporting goods to the

Northwest. They could carry heavier things, including more raw materials and routes between trading centers shortened because horses could travel overland, independent of waterways.²²

Horse ownership had a particularly significant impact on the bison-hunting bands. With horses, they could travel farther in search of herds, stay longer, and transport more bison meat and other Plains products back across the Continental Divide. The horse-owning groups traded their surplus herds, giving them an advantage back on the Plateau where these goods were in demand. The term “cayuse” denoted ponies on the Plains because the Cayuse traded large numbers for goods from the Plains at the Grande Ronde rendezvous. This would later benefit the Hudson’s Bay Company, who relied on the local supply of horses for transport and sometimes for food when they could not find game animals.²³

Although beaver played only a minor role as a source of subsistence on the Plateau, they would not remain insignificant for long. Beginning in the early 1800s, Europeans began to get an inkling that the Columbia Plateau held resources that could be used to make those wealthy who were adventurous enough to bring the pelts to markets in Asia and Europe. The Europeans did not try to fit into the seasonal rounds or the trade network as it existed among the tribes. Instead, they operated within the region in terms of what circumstances in Europe and eastern North America predicated. From the early years of contact to the present, people from the outside have disregarded the Snake River Basin as a place with a particular ecosystem and existing cultures, and treated it as space that existed for people to draw what they wanted from it. The market created the

circumstances to which they adapted, not the local environment.

Different European nations began the dance of competing claims long before the beavers lured the Hudson's Bay Company to the region. The Russians searched the far northern seas and lands for natural wealth starting in the 1740s and the Spanish poked their curious noses into the waterways as early as 1774. The Americans sent their ships sailing around the Horn, as did the British, in the 1790's. A badly confused situation (to everyone except the locals) resulted in a land that filled European and Euro-American fur traders with hopes of immeasurable wealth.

By the early 1820s lines had been drawn by Britain and the United States, the only remaining outside powers after a series of deals excluded the Spanish and Russians from the argument. The Spaniards abandoned their hopes in 1819 to the Adams-Onís treaty with the United States. The Russians initially tried to join forces with John Jacob Astor's Pacific Fur Company. When that failed, they attempted to assert their rights to the Northwest Coast with Czar Alexander's Ukase of 1821, which prohibited all foreign vessels from approaching the coast. Both the United States and Great Britain subsequently asserted their claims and the Russian government chose not to press the issue. Unfortunately, the British and American claims overlapped in some key areas. Both countries wanted the area bounded by the Columbia River on the south and east, the Pacific Ocean on the west, and the 49th parallel on the north. Although the future President Polk would draw far wider sights in the election of 1844, from 1818 until the final resolution of the issue in 1846, the primary disagreement rested on access to the potential ports of Puget Sound and to the transportation route provided by the Columbia

River.²⁴

The land rights of any of the people already living in Oregon Country did not enter into the international debate. In 1846, Travers Twiss wrote a defense of the British claim to the region in which he briefly considered native land tenure, but in terms of who had the right to dispossess the locals of their land. He wrote,

The practice of European nations has certainly recognised in the nation which has first occupied the territory of savage tribes, that live by hunting, fishing, and roaming habits, the sole right of acquiring the soil from the natives by purchase, or cession, or conquest, for the purpose of establishing settlements. The more humane spirit of the modern code of nations seems disposed to reduce this right to a right of *pre-emption*, as against other European nations.²⁵

Settlements established the nation's possession of the country, in European eyes. The only legal recognition of native land tenure was the rewarding of rights to European nations to dispossess them by any means necessary.²⁶

As seemingly clear as Twiss portrays the designation of land ownership, the realities of the local situation in Snake Country made the process far more complicated and balanced between the parties involved. The HBC did not explicitly gain access to Snake Country for furs, but for the places where they established posts, the local people required recognition of their control of that land and compensation for the use of it. Without these posts, the Company would not have been able to carry on the fur trade. When the North West Company began to build Fort Walla Walla (later named Fort Nez Percés) the local people congregated at the site. They wanted to obtain payment for the trees the North West Company had cut for construction of the fort and to make it clear to the British that they would not be allowed to hunt or fish. Through negotiations, Donald Mckenzie reached an agreement with the chiefs.

According to Theodore Stern, the bands around Fort Nez Percés still considered the land and the driftwood from the river their own; the Europeans only had use-rights. Likewise, at Fort Colville, the HBC made a verbal treaty with a local chief that allowed use of the land but prohibited use of the fishery at Kettle Falls.²⁷ The Governor and Committee, the governing body of the HBC, recognized the importance of assuring the people in the Columbia District of their intentions to respect local land tenure. They instructed George Simpson in 1825 to make it clear to the native people, “that we have no desire to possess or cultivate their lands beyond the little garden at the Trading houses.”²⁸ Disregarding prior claims by native inhabitants worked fine on an international level, but not locally.

Though the Americans argued otherwise, their claim to the area lacked any substantial support. The first, Captain Robert Gray’s discovery of the mouth of the Columbia in 1792, was not backed up by settlement until 1810. That settlement, John Jacob Astor’s Fort Astoria formed the Americans’ second shaky support. It lacked much strength because an employee had sold Fort Astoria to the British before it was “captured” by them during the War of 1812. Through some impressive persistence by Astor and some diplomatic maneuvering, the Americans reclaimed the post according to the provisions of the Treaty of Ghent (1814) that required all captured property be returned to pre-War of 1812 owners. This support to the claim may have held more weight had the Americans not reclaimed the fort by merely posting a plaque and raising an American flag at the site before sailing off again. The Lewis and Clark Expedition’s stay in the valley during 1805 and 1806 provided the final support of the American claim. Though they did not leave any basis of a settlement either, the expedition did explore and

nominally claim the region for the United States.²⁹

In 1825, Senator Thomas Hart Benton added several more supports to the claim. The Louisiana Purchase provided the argument for contiguity as it ended at the crest of the Rocky Mountains, the eastern boundary of the disputed territory. The Adams-Onís Treaty of 1819 with Spain ceded the region north of the 42nd parallel to the United States. These added to the American argument, but not to any extent that clearly outweighed any of the British arguments for their claim. More than anything else, the Monroe Doctrine and the idea of Manifest Destiny added momentum to the American claim. As time progressed, the facts of the American claim came up in speeches to the Senate or House less and the idea that the Oregon Country was American country because it was part of North America and the American destiny included their sovereignty stretching from sea to sea entered the discussion more and more.³⁰

The British had fewer but more substantial supports for their claim to Oregon Country. First, Captain George Vancouver explored the Puget Sound extensively in 1792, giving English names to most of the landforms in sight of his ship. Second, the North West Company, and then the Hudson's Bay Company after the North West Company merged with the Hudson's Bay Company in 1821, had small settlements throughout the region, such as: Spokane House (1810), Fort Okanagan (1811), and Fort Walla Walla (1818). Finally, the Nootka Convention of 1790 with Spain granted rights of access anywhere north of the Spanish California settlements to the British. They did not want to lose access to Puget Sound or to the Columbia River because of the fur trade and a sense of empire held dear by the British Crown and public.³¹

Although the British publicly held that their claim to the region south of the Columbia River was legitimate, they did not expect to retain those lands once an actual settlement was reached. They did expect, however, to retain the area north of the Columbia. The settlement they sought in the dispute with the Americans was a continuation of the 49° parallel from the Continental Divide (the accepted boundary to that point) to its intersection with the Columbia and then following that river to its mouth at the Pacific Ocean. They remained adamant throughout the nearly thirty years of the dispute about maintaining their rights to the Columbia, as it was the only navigable river out of the rich fur territory of the Northern Rockies and New Caledonia--what is now British Columbia.

The first attempt to settle the Oregon Question did not address the core of the dispute: who held sovereignty over the region? Instead, the negotiators who produced the Convention of 1818 limited their agreement to use rights. They worked out a set of rules that appeared on paper to be fair and reasonable to both parties but that proved to benefit the Hudson's Bay Company far more than anyone else once applied to the actual situation in the Columbia River basin.

The agreement between the two countries is short and part of a larger set of negotiations concluded in the Convention of 1818. Only Article III pertains to the Oregon Question. It reads:

It is agreed, that any Country that may be claimed by either Party on the North West Coast of America, Westward of the Stony Mountains, shall, together with it's (sic) Harbours, Bays, and Creeks, and the Navigation of all Rivers within the same, be free and open, for the term of ten years from the date of the Signature of the Present Convention, to the Vessels, Citizens, and Subject[s] of the Two

Powers: it being well understood, that this Agreement is not to be construed to the Prejudice of any Claim, which either of the Two High Contracting Parties may have to any part of said Country, nor shall it be taken to affect the Claims of any other Power or State to any Part of the said Country; the only object of the High Contracting Parties, in that respect, being to prevent disputes and differences amongst Themselves.³²

Despite the relative lack of importance of the area for the British in 1818, their negotiators held tenaciously to their rights to the region. The American negotiators wrote in the message conveying papers relating to the negotiations that,

The importance which seems to have been attached to that subject [the Oregon Question] by Great Britain induces a belief that it will again be brought forward, at some future occasion, with a view to a definitive arrangement.³³

The American correspondence, on the other hand, put no great weight on the Oregon lands. The other issues resolved by the Convention - impressment, the slave trade, fisheries in international waters, and neutrality - garnered more attention from the American side. The two countries renewed the Convention in 1827 for an indefinite period because no settlement could be reached. In the years leading up to 1846 the British strengthened their stance, and the issue moved to the top of the American agenda.³⁴

In 1818 the Hudson's Bay Company only had a potential interest in the region. More pressing matters preoccupied them in the eastern Canada. The North West Company had established itself as the most effective opposition to the Hudson's Bay Company's monopoly of the fur trade in Canada. Formed by fur traders out of Montreal, the North West Company had been fighting an effective war over trapping grounds with the Hudson's Bay Company that devastated beaver populations across central and eastern Canada and sometimes led to human bloodshed. Surely the Company looked west to the rich fur trapping grounds of Oregon Country and New Caledonia. In 1818, however, the

only British who occupied the Oregon Country worked as trappers and traders for the North West Company.

The extent to which the fur desert policy can be considered Crown policy depends on whether implicit approval constitutes a policy. The British government never prohibited the HBC from carrying out the fur desert policy even though it potentially could endanger Anglo-American relations. But, to the North West Company and the HBC, the British government could be frustratingly dismissive regarding the Columbia River and surrounding fur trading regions. The British Parliament, public, and press remained nearly silent on the Oregon Question until the 1840s.³⁵ When the Americans pressed for the return of Astoria at the 1818 Convention negotiations, Lord Castlereagh, the British Secretary for Foreign Affairs, decided, according to Frederick Merk, “to maintain the status quo.”³⁶ Circumstances in England following years of war and their desire to keep Anglo-American relations friendly prevented the British from pressing their claim to Oregon Country too strongly.³⁷

Fortunately for the HBC, the Governor and Committee had connections to and within the government. Edward Ellice, one of the Company’s partners, held a seat in Parliament. J.H. Pelly, the HBC’s governor, and the Committee in England had access to diplomatic papers and decision-making at the Foreign Office. Finally, George Canning, the British foreign secretary from 1822 to 1827, strongly supported maintaining a British presence on the west coast of North America. The Company chose to pressure members of the Cabinet who favored their presence in Oregon Country, such as Canning, while carrying out policies, such as the fur desert, that furthered their own interests.³⁸

The North West Company merged into the HBC in 1821, ending years of conflict. At that point, the Oregon Country gained new importance to the Company. The inter-company conflict had devastated beaver trapping grounds to the east of the Rockies. The North West Company had trapped in the Columbia River area, but mostly closer to the coast and in more northern areas. They sent brigades to the Snake River Country starting in 1818 but they had to spend too much time defending themselves against hostile groups of Blackfeet to bring in many beaver pelts.³⁹

The HBC took over operations in the area in 1821, but made few changes. First, the Company questioned whether the Columbia District merited the effort required to keep it. The Company's governing committee in London wrote to George Simpson, governor of the Northern Department in February 1822,

We understand that hitherto the trade of the Columbia has not been profitable, and from all that we have learnt on the Subject we are not sanguine in our expectations of being able to make it so in the future. But if by any improved management the loss can be reduced to a small sum, it is worth a serious consideration, whether it may not be a good policy to hold possession of that country, with a view of protecting the more valuable district to the North of it.⁴⁰

Also, Americans had begun to reach the Northern Rockies in substantial numbers. The Committee wrote to the Chief factors of the Columbia Department in September of 1822,

We have likewise to notice an extract from an American paper (No. 6 enclosed) of a party of 180 persons having left the Missouri for an expedition across the Rocky Mountains towards the Columbia. As well as the intention of the American Government to form a settlement at the Columbia, You will be very particular in transmitting every information, if any steps have been taken by the Americans to carry either of these plans into effect; and we depend on your strenuous exertions to secure the Fur trade to Great Britain by your liberality to and kind treatment of the Natives.⁴¹

While the Company knew the area south of the Columbia would be lost to the

Americans, they planned on keeping the lands north of the river. The prospect of competing with Americans in these lands did not appeal to the Governor and Committee in England, nor to George Simpson. Their experiences across Canada had taught them a painful lesson: when the monopoly was undermined by competition, the beaver trapping grounds (and therefore profits) suffered immensely.

From the early days forward competition had led to overtrapping. The height of the opposition from 1758 to 1821 destroyed the beaver colonies of central Canada. The evidence of decline appears throughout the records of returns for the early nineteenth century. The 1822-1823 Lac La Pluie report relayed that the beaver had been exhausted for some time in the region. By 1820 Fort Dauphin experienced a scarcity of beaver. In the returns from the Lower Red River in 1804, 2868 pounds of beaver pelts were brought out of the region; by 1808 the returns dwindled to 908 pounds. The total numbers of beaver pelts taken out of the United States and Canada prior to 1821 also show the effects of this overtrapping. In 1765, 66,664 pelts went to market. In 1802, 140,000 beavers lost their lives and their furs. Then, in 1820, only 56,000 let curiosity lead them to their demise in steel traps baited with castoreum. With this recent past in mind, the Company prepared to deter Americans from reaching even the periphery of their beaver preserves in New Caledonia.⁴²

Their plan of defense consisted of creating a buffer zone out of the Snake River Basin and the area that is now the state of Oregon. That territory, if made unattractive to American trappers, would turn potential competitors away before they neared richer preserves. The Committee wrote to John D. Cameron, Chief Factor of the Columbia

District in 1824:

It is likewise desirable that the Post at Walla Walla should be made as respectable as possible, as well as any others on the North Side of the River, and as we cannot expect to have a more Southern boundary than the Columbia in any Treaty with the Americans (altho' we are entitled to it from occupancy) it will be very desirable that the hunters should get as much out of the Snake Country as possible for the next few years.⁴³

In contrast to places north of the river, the land to the south of the Columbia held no long-term value to the Company. But the idea of making a buffer zone out of less productive regions is not unique to the Columbia Department. In the February 1822 letter from the Committee to Simpson, they wrote,

The Russians are endeavoring to set up claims in the North West Coast of America as low as Latitude 51, and we think it desirable to extend our trading posts as far to the West and North from Fraser's River in Caledonia, as may be practicable, if there appears any reasonable prospect of doing so profitably.⁴⁴

Also, in the 1820's the Ottawa River region formed a frontier that protected the interior trade of Canada from American interest and interference.⁴⁵

While the Committee advocated getting "as much out of the Snake Country as possible for the next few years," George Simpson carried the idea one step further and wrote in his 1824 journal entry (meant for Committee eyes) that, "If properly managed no question exists that it would yield handsome profits as we have convincing proof that the country is a rich preserve of Beaver and which for political reasons we should endeavor to destroy as fast as possible."⁴⁶ He made the decision after visiting the region to determine its usefulness to the HBC. There the fur desert policy began. While the Committee envisioned the economic and political benefits of heavy trapping in the Columbia District, Simpson focused the brigades' efforts on trapping the region,

especially the Snake River Basin, clear of beaver. Simpson knew the river would be the conduit for Americans moving westward to trap.

Without the circumstances created by the Convention of 1818, the reason for the fur desert policy would not have existed. Without George Simpson the idea of the fur desert most likely would not have existed. Few people in the Company seem to have had the initiative, focus on profits, and generally ruthless personality to conceive of such an effort. But for Simpson, the policy fits in with other decisions he made. Unlike most other officials in the Company, Simpson did not work his way up through the ranks of the fur trade. He entered the trade as governor of the Northern Department, an area that covered roughly the northern half of the Company's holding in North America and the territory west of the Rockies. As a teenager, Simpson earned a reputation as having an astute business mind. He worked as a clerk at a sugar brokerage firm in London owned by a partnership that included his uncle and Andrew Wedderburn. Wedderburn bought stock in the HBC in 1808 and was elected to the governing committee in 1810. When the Committee began looking for a new governor after the merger of the North West Company and HBC in 1821, Wedderburn recommended Simpson for the post. Simpson had the requisite business acumen and the personal fortitude to handle the post-merger economic and personnel situations. Also, Simpson served as insurance against the possibility that the Crown might arrest the Southern Department governor, William Williams. Williams had not always considered the legality of his tactics against the North West Company as important as their effectiveness.⁴⁷

The Committee made a fortunate choice from a business perspective. Simpson

had intelligence, vigor, and resolve that served him well as governor. He earned the respect of his subordinates early. When he and Doctor John McLoughlin set out for the Columbia District from York Factory on Hudson Bay in 1824, Simpson gave McLoughlin twenty-day head start. In six weeks Simpson overtook McLoughlin, arriving in his camp in time for breakfast. Applying his business sense to the Company's financial situation, Simpson worked to decrease costs and increase profits. In the short time between his appointment in 1822 and 1825, Simpson cut the number of Company employees from 1,983 people to 827. At the same time he dropped wages for ordinary employees (or, recommended the Committee do so) by 50%.⁴⁸

Simpson considered the Company's operations in Snake Country in the same manner that he looked at the Company's human "resources" and took the necessary actions to make the business more lucrative and secure. The fur desert policy follows logically from this premise. Excluding competition insured the Company would remain profitable.

In his personal life, Simpson did not gain the same admiration. Upstaging McLoughlin in front of *his* subordinates, cutting wages, and dropping the woman he had married *à la facon du pays*⁴⁹ for a British woman did not help his cold, self-involved reputation. Descriptions of him reflect awe, not affection or admiration. His biographer wrote, "throughout his forty years in the service Simpson subordinated any considerations of humanity to the welfare of the charter company."⁵⁰

The Committee in London agreed with Simpson's plan, caring little for his personal foibles as long as they did not affect business. The first Snake Country

Expedition started out in 1823 under Alexander Ross. It brought in 4000 pelts. The next expedition, led by Peter Skene Ogden, began the serious effort at clearing the region of beaver. Over the next six years, Ogden's expeditions would trap about 18,000 beaver in the area south of the Columbia. Although later eclipsed by the changes wrought by white Americans, the fur desert policy stands as an example of what values and actions the market economy brought to the West and the extreme results that could occur.⁵¹

Notes

- ¹ Frederick Merk, ed., *Fur Trade and Empire: George Simpson's Journal* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931): 46.
- ² Journal entry, 30 September 1843, at Rock Creek in Idaho, in John C. Fremont, *Narrative of the Exploring Expedition to the Rocky Mountains* (Syracuse: Hall and Dickson, 1848): 224.
- ³ Journal entry, 3 February 1826, confluence of the Burnt River and Snake River, in E.E. Rich, ed., assisted by A.M. Johnson, *Ogden's Snake Country Journals, 1824-26* (London: The Hudson Bay Record Society, 1950): 123.
- ⁴ D.W. Meinig, *The Great Columbia Plain: A Historical Geography, 1805-1910*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1968): 88.; Peter J. Mehringer, Jr., "Prehistoric Environments," in *Great Basin*, vol. 11, *Handbook of North American Indians*, gen. ed. William C. Sturtevant (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1984): 33.
- ⁵ Samuel Newton Dicken, *Oregon Divided: A Regional Geography* (Portland: Oregon Historical Society, 1982): 105, 120.; Allen A. DeLucia and the Cartography Students of the Department of Geography at the University of Idaho, *The Compact Atlas of Idaho* (Moscow, ID: Center for Business Development and Research and Cart-O-Graphics, University of Idaho, 1983): 10.; Idaho Department of Commerce and Development, *The Idaho Almanac: Territorial Centennial Edition, 1863-1963* (Boise: Idaho Department of Commerce and Development: 1963): 35.
- ⁶ Dicken, *Oregon Divided*, 101, 105-106.
- ⁷ Dicken, *Oregon Divided*, 120-121.
- ⁸ DeLucia *et al.*, *The Compact Atlas of Idaho*, 10.; Meinig, *The Great Columbia Plain: A Historical Geography, 1805-1910*, 11.; Leonard J. Arrington, *History of Idaho* (Moscow: University of Idaho Press and Boise: Idaho State Historical Society, 1994): 13.
- ⁹ Dicken, *Oregon Divided*, 145.
- ¹⁰ Journal entry, 2 March 1826, Bridge River (now Clover Creek), in Rich, *Ogden's Snake Country Journals, 1824-26*, 256.
- ¹¹ DeLucia *et al.*, *The Compact Atlas of Idaho*, 9.
- ¹² B. Robert Butler, "Prehistory of the Snake and Salmon River Area" in *Great Basin*, vol. 11, *Handbook of North American Indians* ed. William C. Sturtevant (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1984): 33.
- ¹³ DeLucia *et al.*, *The Compact Atlas of Idaho*, 10.

¹⁴ L.S. Cressman and Luther Shee, *The Sandal & the Cave: The Indians of Oregon* (Portland: Beaver Books, 1962): 23.; Richard N. Holmer, "Prehistory of the Northern Shoshone" in *Fort Hall and the Shoshone-Bannock* ed. E.S. Lohse and Richard N. Holmer (Pocatello: Idaho State University Press, 1990): 53.

¹⁵ E. Jane Gay, *With the Nez Perces: Alice Fletcher in the Field, 1889-1892*, eds. Frederick E. Hoxie and Joan T. Mark (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981): xvii.; Steven Hackenburger, "Cultural Ecology and Evolution in Central Montane Idaho" (Ph.D. diss., University of Wyoming, 1988): 41.; Caroline James, *Nez Perce Women in Transition* (Moscow: University of Idaho Press, 1996): 21-22.

¹⁶ Hackenburger, "Cultural Ecology and Evolution in Central Montane Idaho," 39-41.; James, *Nez Perce Women in Transition*, 14, 31.

¹⁷ James, *Nez Perce Women in Transition*, 9.; Hackenburger, "Cultural Ecology and Evolution in Central Montane Idaho," 41.

¹⁸ Hackenburger, "Cultural Ecology and Evolution in Central Montane Idaho," 41, 43.; Robert F. Murphy and Yolanda Murphy, "Northern Shoshone and Bannock," in *Great Basin*, vol. 11, *Handbook of North American Indians* gen. ed. William C. Sturtevant, 291.; Robert F. Murphy and Yolanda Murphy, *Shoshone-Bannock Subsistence and Society* Anthropological Records, vol. 16, no. 7 (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1960): 332-333.

¹⁹ Ake Hultkranz, "The Shoshones in the Rocky Mountain Area," in *American Indian Ethnohistory: California and Basin Plateau Indians* ed. David Agee Horr (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1974): 189.; Murphy and Murphy, "Northern Shoshone and Bannock," 306.

²⁰ Keith Lawrence, letter to the author, 21 July 1997.

²¹ Theodore Stern, *Chiefs and Chief Traders: Indian Relations at Fort Nez Perces, 1818-1855* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 1993): 22-23. Merle W. Wells, "Introduction," in *The Northern Shoshoni* by Brigham D. Madsen (Caldwell, ID: The Caxton Printers, Ltd., 1980): 23. Thomas R. Garth, "Early Nineteenth Century Tribal Relations in the Columbia Plateau" in *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 20 (1964): 47, 49.

²² Theodore Stern, *Chiefs and Chief Traders*, 33.

²³ Garth, "Early Nineteenth Century Tribal Relations in the Columbia Plateau," 47.

²⁴ James P. Ronda, *Astoria and Empire* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990): 85.; E.E. Rich, *The History of the Hudson's Bay Company, 1670-1870*, vol. III (London: The Hudson's Bay Record Society, 1959): 608.

²⁵ Travers Twiss, *The Oregon Question Examined: In Respect to Facts and the Law of Nations* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, & Longmans, 1846): 252.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 154-155.

²⁷ Stern, *Chiefs and Chief Traders*, 11, 129.; David H. Chance, *Influences of the Hudson's Bay Company on the Native Cultures of the Colville District* Northwest Anthropological Research Notes vol. 7 No. 1, pt. 2 (Moscow, ID, 1973): 27.

²⁸ Governor and Committee, London, to Governor George Simpson, 11 March 1825, quoted in Chance, *Influences of the Hudson's Bay Company on the Native Cultures of the Colville District*, 31.

²⁹ Ronda, *Astoria and Empire*, 288-289, 295, 312-314.

³⁰ Frederick Merk, *Albert Gallatin and the Oregon Problem: A Study in Anglo-American Diplomacy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950): 20.; Rich, *The History of the Hudson's Bay Company, 1670-1870*, vol. III, 609.; For Congressional speeches, see: "Occupation of the Columbia River," *Annals of Congress*, 16th Congress, 2nd Session (25 January 1821).; Sen. Benton (Mo.) Speech on the Northwest Coast of America, *Annals of Congress*, 17th Congress, 2nd Session (17 February 1823): 246-251.; "Occupation of the Columbia River," *Annals of Congress*, 18th Congress, 1st Session (14 April 1824): 2345-2348.; "Occupation of the Mouth of the Oregon," *Register of Debates*, 18th Congress, 2nd Session (20 December 1824): 13-28.; "Occupation of the Oregon River," *Register of Debates*, 18th Congress, 2nd Session (26 February 1825): 687-695.

³¹ Merk, *The Oregon Question*, 140.

³² Department of State, "Fisheries, Boundaries, and Restoration of Slaves," 20 October 1818, *Treaties and Other International Agreements of the United States of America 1776-1949*, vol. 12, 58-59.

³³ "Great Britain - Convention of October 20, 1820," *American State Papers: Foreign Affairs*, Vol. IV (No. 306): 381.

³⁴ Department of State, "Fisheries, Boundaries, and Restoration of Slaves," 74-75.

³⁵ Merk, *The Oregon Question*, 139.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 31.

³⁷ Reginald C. Stuart, *United States Expansionism and British North America, 1775-1871* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988): 79.

³⁸ Rich, *The History of the Hudson's Bay Company, 1670-1870*, vol. III, 401, 611.; Merk, *The Oregon Question*, 139.

³⁹ Alexander Ross, *The Fur Hunters of the Far West*, 154.

⁴⁰ R. Harvey Fleming, *Minutes of the Council of the Northern Department of Rupert Land, 1821-1831* (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1940): 302.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 336.

⁴² Arthur S. Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade: Their Role as Trappers, Hunters, and Middlemen in the Lands Southwest of Hudson Bay, 1660-1870* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974): 117.; Harold A. Innis, *The Fur Trade in Canada: An Introduction to Canadian Economic History*, prepared by S.D. Clark and W.T. Easterbrook based on the revised edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962): 264, 268.

⁴³ Governor and Committee, London, to John D. Haldane, 22 July 1824, quoted in Merk, *Fur Trade and Empire*, 242.

⁴⁴ Governor and Committee, London, to George Simpson, 22 February 1822, quoted in *Ibid.*, 175.

⁴⁵ John S. Galbraith, *The Hudson's Bay Company as Imperial Factor, 1821-1869* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1957): 31.

⁴⁶ Journal entry, 28 October 1825, in Merk, *Fur Trade and Empire: George Simpson's Journal*, 46.

⁴⁷ Andrew Wedderburn later changed his name to Andrew Colvile.; Galbraith, *The Little Emperor: Governor Simpson of the Hudson's Bay Company* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1950): 16-17, 28.

⁴⁸ Galbraith, *The Little Emperor*, 60.

⁴⁹ "In the custom of the country," meaning he had married a Native American woman according to the local customs.; *Ibid.*, 109.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 47

⁵¹ Fort Vancouver, Fur trade returns for Columbia and New Caledonia districts. 1825-1857. In the handwriting of James Douglas, A/B/20/V3, British Columbia Archives.; Merk, *Fur Trade and Empire*, 44, 280.; Rich, *Ogden's Snake Country Journals, 1824-26*, 256.; Cline, *Peter Skene Ogden and the Hudson's Bay Company*, 85.; Journal entry, 22 April 1827, near Klamath Lake, in K.G. Davies, ed., assisted by A.M. Johnson, *Peter Skene Ogden's Snake Country Journal, 1826-1827* (London: The Hudson Bay Record Society, 1961): 109. Ogden indicated they had 2230 beavers and otters at that point, no other total was recorded in the journal or in James Douglas' record book.; Meinig, *The Great Columbia Plain*, 88.

Chapter Two

"This day 11 Beaver 1 Otter we have now ruined this quarter we may prepare to start."

- Peter Skene Ogden, 1825-1826 Snake Country Expedition¹

In the middle of the 1825-1826 Snake Country Expedition, in May 1826, Expedition leader Peter Skene Ogden recorded his evaluation of the previous four months in the journal he kept for the governing Committee. He wrote,

I certainly from the different accounts and reports I had received expected to find the South Side [of the Snake River] as rich in Beaver as the North side formerly was particularly as it had never been examined or Trapp'd by any Party, but we are convinced of the contrary which [h]as caused us serious loss of time.²

Ogden's disappointment lay not in the lack of profits but in the time he wasted on the southern side of the Snake River. Considered from a narrow, local view, to declare time wasted seems unwarranted. Ogden's party had accomplished quite a feat. In the four months they had traveled 650 miles over dry, rough country. Even though the brigades trapped just 1425 beaver, half of what they had taken in other, better, beaver territory, they cleared the country of beaver. Beaver did not inhabit the area extensively because the available water and habitat did not support large populations. Only a little over one-half of the streams had water year-round. The brigades succeeded in their purpose, so it is surprising Ogden would considered the Expedition's activities there a loss.

Yet Ogden's frustration permeates the journal entry and when his situation is viewed in the larger context of international dispute, his judgment gains validity. Two pressures bearing on him influenced his attitude: the imminent arrival of American trappers and the vastness of the territory to be trapped clear of beaver. Looking back over

the late winter and early spring of 1826, Ogden realized he should have spent the time in better beaver territory. Fur traders had not explored large parts of Snake Country by 1826. As far as Ogden knew the rest of the region held populations like the one the Snake Country Expedition had exploited in 1824-25 in what is now western Montana and the Bear River Valley. They took 3152 beaver from that region in just four months. If he had spent his time in territories like the southern side of the Snake enough beaver would have remained to entice the Americans and the fur desert policy would have failed.³

In retrospect, Ogden need not have been concerned. As he explored the region over the next several years, as far south as the Gulf of California, he realized that much of it lacked extensive beaver habitat and focused his efforts on those areas with substantial beaver populations. The combined effects of the Expeditions' efficient and disciplined efforts and beaver biology resulted in the near extirpation of Snake Country beaver and the success of the fur desert policy in keeping the Americans out of the Snake Country and New Caledonia fur trade.

Prior to the HBC's occupation of the Northwest, British and American fur trade companies had trapped the rivers and streams throughout the area. A handful of expeditions made it into Snake Country. As early as 1810 trappers harassed the beaver colonies there. Andrew Henry, an American, led a party of men through the Upper Snake River area for the Missouri Company but failed to establish themselves in the trade due to the harsh winter weather. The Astorians also arrived in 1810. The British North West Company sent brigades into the country to the south of the Columbia River in 1819 under Donald McKenzie, but the Blackfeet made it too dangerous to trap many furs. Michel

Bourdon in 1822 and Finan McDonald in 1823 had similar experiences in the Snake Country. By the time the HBC arrived, people knew the potential wealth of the region but had failed to find a way to exploit it.⁴

Alexander Ross led the first HBC Snake Country Expedition in 1823, before the fur desert policy had been fully communicated to the traders in the Columbia District. He set out to exploit the beaver populations, but not necessarily to clear them entirely.

George Simpson thought Ross was "empty headed" and ranted,

This important duty [the Expeditions] should not be left to a self sufficient empty headed man like Ross who feels no further interest therein than in as far as it secures to him a Sal^y of £120 p Annum and whose reports are so full of bombast and marvelous nonsense that it is impossible to get any information that can be depended on from him.⁵

Although he brought in 154 packhorses loaded with beaver pelts, Ross also brought a group of Americans, including Jedediah Smith of the Rocky Mountain Fur Company, back to Flathead House, thus showing the Americans the way through the mountains.

Ross may not have deserved Simpson's tirade, but he certainly disappointed the Company's hopes.

Simpson replaced Ross with Peter Skene Ogden, a former North West Company trader. From his first expedition in 1824-25 to his last in 1829-30, Ogden established the foundation for the fur desert. Even though some of his expeditions turned into "explorations," he cleared Snake Country of beaver to the point that it no longer could support financial ventures by Americans in the Rockies.

At 34, when he led his first Snake Country Expedition, Ogden already had considerable experience in the fur trade and in facing competition. The son of a

prominent Montreal judge, Ogden chose to enter the fur trade rather than continue on with his education to study law. At 16, he worked for John Jacob Astor as a clerk in the American Fur Company's Montreal operations. In 1810, about the time Simpson entered his uncle's sugar brokerage firm, Ogden joined the North West Company, also as a clerk. This involved him immediately in the competition with the HBC.⁶

At Ile á la Crosse, his first post, Ogden and another North West Company employee, Samuel Black, harassed the HBC. He and Black climbed into the nearby HBC fort, hung around outside it showing off their pistols and knives, and terrorized Peter Fidler, who was in charge of the fort. The next spring, Fidler sent his men to Churchill Factory. Ogden and some North West Company trappers stayed just ahead of them for a week, intercepting the trade with the local Native Americans. In 1817 Ogden arrived in the Pacific Northwest and worked out of Fort George and Spokane House, where he met his wife Julia Rivet of the Nez Perce.⁷

When the North West Company and the HBC merged in 1821, Ogden's past caught up with him. The HBC remembered his antics at Ile á la Crosse quite well. They did not include him in the new concern. In 1822 Ogden traveled to London to plead his case for reinstatement, which he achieved with the support of George Simpson in 1823.⁸

Ogden set out on his first Expedition in 1824 full of high expectations. The day trappers caught the first beaver at the mouth of the Wild Horse River, Ogden wrote, "This is a Commencement but I trust we shall not end ere we have Six Thous. owing to my ignorance of the Country I am bound to, with this number I shall be Contented if more they are heartily welcome."⁹ The next six years spent in Snake Country would temper his

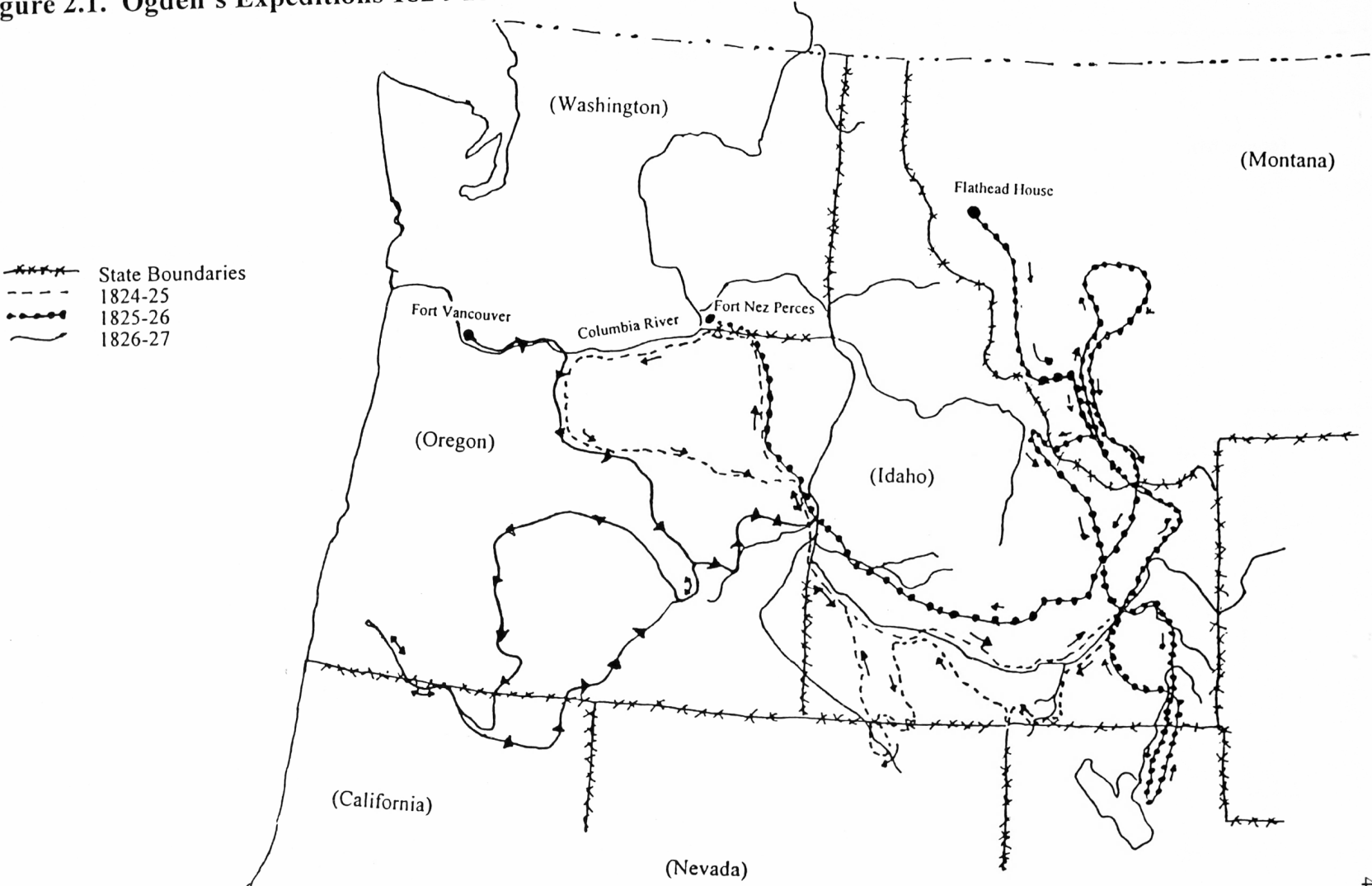
enthusiasm and expectations. Even when he came to know Snake Country, he never gained six thousand beaver and conditions tested his abilities as a leader and a fur trader.

Each fall the Expeditions set out from Flathead Post or Fort Nez Perces to make a circular round through the territory to the south and west of the Columbia. (See maps for expedition routes.) Ogden explored large parts of the West for the HBC as he led his parties through what is now western Montana, central and southern Idaho, eastern Oregon, northern Nevada, and northwestern Utah. During the 1829-30 Expedition, Ogden ventured as far as south as the Gulf of California and then north through California. Concurrent with Ogden's expeditions, Alexander Roderick McLeod led trappers on the Oregon coast in 1826 and 1826-27, as far south as the Rogue River, in which he explored and trapped the Umpqua and Coquille rivers and the coastal mountain range. His efforts largely failed because of a combination of bad leadership skills and hostile native communities. In the more crucial lands further inland, however, the fur desert policy succeeded. After Work's 1833-34 Expedition only small, sporadic groups trapped Snake Country.

The daily routine consisted of bringing in the previous night's catch, packing up the camp, and gathering the horses, and moving on to fresh beaver grounds. If the beaver numbers warranted more trapping, the party would stay in one place until they had taken what they could. They had to travel quickly to cover the maximum possible area and still return to Fort Nez Perces or Fort Vancouver by July, in time for the boat for Britain.

The make-up and size of the Expeditions varied considerably in the 1820s. The first couple of Expeditions had about 60 engage and freeman trappers. After 1826, the

Figure 2.1. Ogden's Expeditions 1824-1827



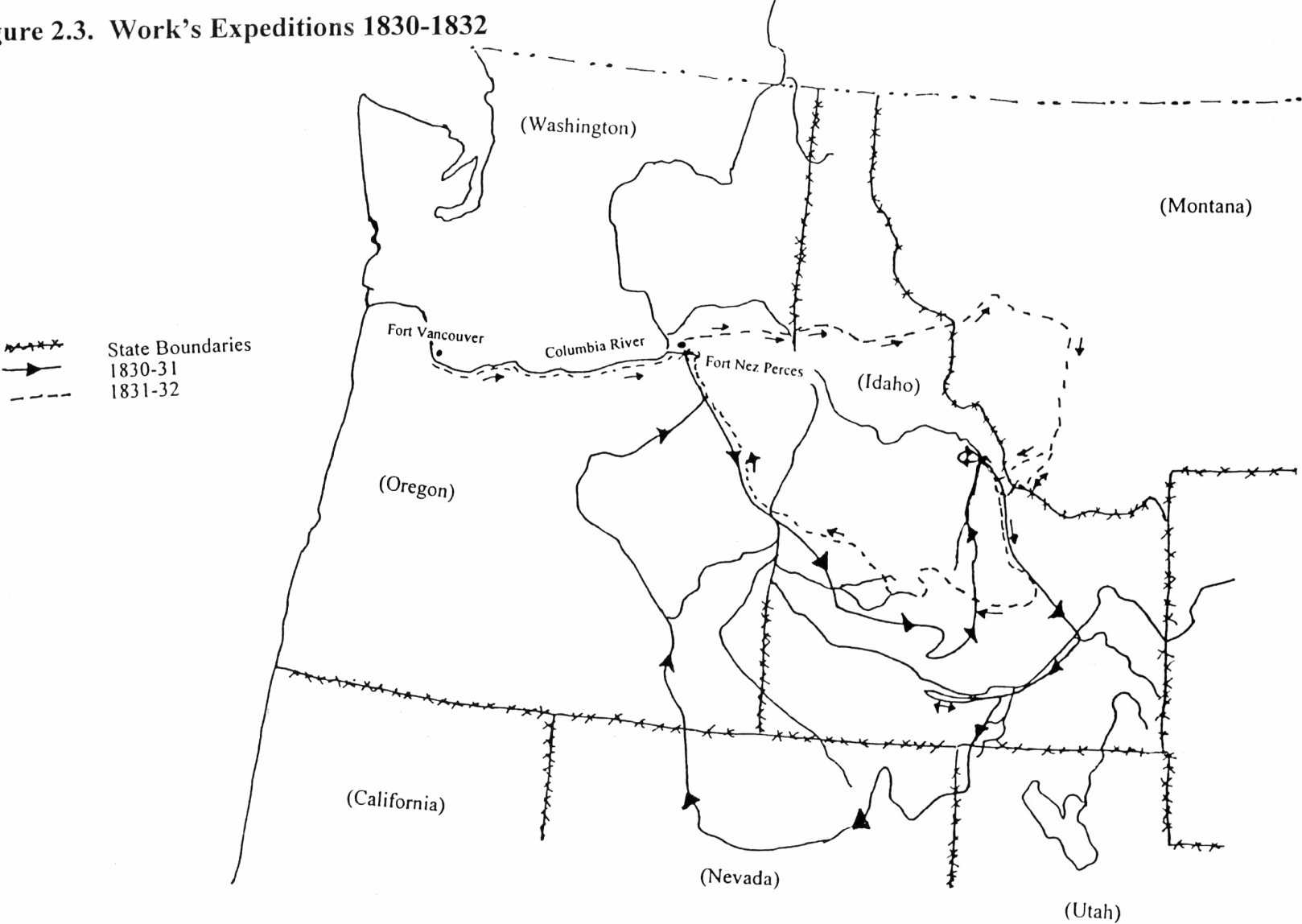
Sources: Rich, *Ogden's Snake Country Journals, 1824-1826*, map.; Davies, *Peter Skene Ogden's Snake Country Expedition, 1826-1827*, map.

Figure 2.2. Ogden's Expeditions 1827-1829



Source: Williams, *Peter Skene Ogden's Journals 1827-1828 and 1818-1829*, map.

Figure 2.3. Work's Expeditions 1830-1832



Sources: Haines, *The Snake Country Expedition of 1830-1831*, 6.; Lewis and Philips. *The Journal of John Work*, 191.

remaining outfits had about 30 to 40 trappers. Women and children, the trappers' families accompanied the brigades. In 1824-25, 30 women and 35 children participated. The Company's governing Committee and Governor Simpson both discouraged their presence because of the expectation women would only slow the brigades and drain their resources.

The general tone of Ogden's journals is anxious and pressured. Prior to about 1828, the possibility of Americans overrunning Snake Country remained very real. Perhaps he wanted to cover himself in case the fur desert policy failed, but the journals describe endless causes of difficulty and rare instances of good fortune. His positive comments concern streams they had cleared, such as his remarks at the Big Lost River in early October 1825: "A small stream not many years since well stocked in Beaver but Now entirely ruined there were a few remaining but the Snake Expedition of last year have (sic) secured them all."¹⁰ His negative, or worried comments, run the gamut from lost Expedition members to bugs: "As for insects we have no Cause to Complain, Fleas Wood Lice, Spiders & Crickets by millions."¹¹

The trips may have brought great profits to the Company, but they instilled little joy in the lives of the trappers, their families, and the Chief Trader at the head of the group. Heading out from the posts, they knew the problems they would face. The Americans, the least dangerous to life and limb, posed an economic threat. The Americans could lure freemen and their pelts away from the expeditions and they too could trap anywhere they wished under the rules of the Convention of 1818. Often in the months in the field Ogden would have to send trappers out to beat the wandering

Americans to streams. If not the Americans, the weather could slow their progress. Going over Lost Trail Pass in January 1825, Ogden bemoaned the slow pace the weather had reduced them to because otherwise, "2 or 300 Beaver could be collected in this quarter."¹² (What weather he was expecting in January at 7000 feet, one can only wonder.) The Blackfeet Indians caused the most fear and apprehension. At one point near the Clark Fork River in western Montana, the freemen resisted going any further because they feared being attacked by Piegan bands in the area. The actual loss of life was not as high as the number of horses lost to raids by any of a number of parties, including the Blackfeet, in the vicinity of the trappers' camps.¹³

John Work's journals of the 1830-31 and 1831-32 Expeditions give an indication of how successful Ogden's brigades had been. The weather, Blackfeet raids, and freemen still presented problems, but the American threat and the territory had both become more manageable. Work's outfits to Snake Country moved at a considerable pace and covered immense territories, but did not bring in substantial numbers of furs. During the stretch of the 1830-31 Expedition from 28 October 1830 to 4 April 1831, Work did not record a single beaver trapped. Unlike Ogden who worried if only ten beaver met their fate during the night, Work did not mention a hint of concern.¹⁴

John Work's life also differed considerably from Peter Skene Ogden's. Born in about 1792 in County Donegal, Ireland, Work did not join the fur trade until 1814, at age 22. What occupied him prior to 1814 remains a mystery. From his well-written journals it appears he had a good education. The circumstances that led him to join the HBC remain unknown also, but he entered the trade as a steward and worked his way up to clerk while

at York Factory. Simpson added Work to Ogden's contingent that went west in 1823 to the Columbia District. Once there, he moved around considerably, from Fort George to Spokane House to Fort Colvile to Fort Vancouver during the 1820s. At some point he met his métis wife, Josette (Susette?) Legace who lived near Fort Colvile or Spokane House. In 1830, Simpson replaced Ogden with Work in Snake Country.¹⁵

By the 1830s Snake Country had developed quite a reputation for the difficulties it posed to the brigades. In an 1833 letter to a friend, Archibald McKenzie wrote, "Poor Work still continues wandering among the *serpents* [probably the Snake (Shoshone) Indians] and independent of the venom, I believe he has no enviable task of it; it is likely this season he will succeed me here [Fort Langely]."¹⁶ Personal hardship abounded in the daily life on the brigades. During Work's 1831-32 outfit, a man was shot on 30 January during a skirmish with the Blackfeet at Birch Creek (in present-day Montana). He died about six weeks later on the Salmon River after suffering immensely. Work described his death: "William Raymond, our unfortunate man who was wounded on 30 January, died this afternoon. He was reduced to a mere skeleton; he had taken scarcely any nourishment since he was wounded. The wound was mortified."¹⁷ Even so, the profits brought in and the buffer zone created by the Snake Country Expeditions ensured the continuation of the Expeditions until the 1840s, when the question became a moot point due to the settlement of the Oregon Question with the Americans.

To read the British journals from the Snake Country Expeditions is to read a story of creating scarcity. From the start there is a sense that trapping exceeded local population resilience quickly. As time passed, the ransacking done by the trappers

produced a widespread effect. The effects of both prior and contemporary Hudson's Bay Company, American, and Indian trapping and beaver biology aided the Snake Country Expeditions in their efforts. In the end, the British created the fur desert. Not every beaver was taken but they left insufficient numbers for a successful or even marginally worthwhile trapping expedition. During the critical years of the Snake Expeditions, 1823-1841, Hudson's Bay took approximately 35,000 beaver out of the region. In 1823-24 alone, the yield was 4500 beaver. By 1834, the average annual yield was down to 665 beaver. Even when the population rebounded slightly, in the late 1830s, the numbers trapped remained low, never again reaching 4000. The evidence of this decline appears throughout the journals, even in the first several years of the policy, when overall returns remained high.¹⁸

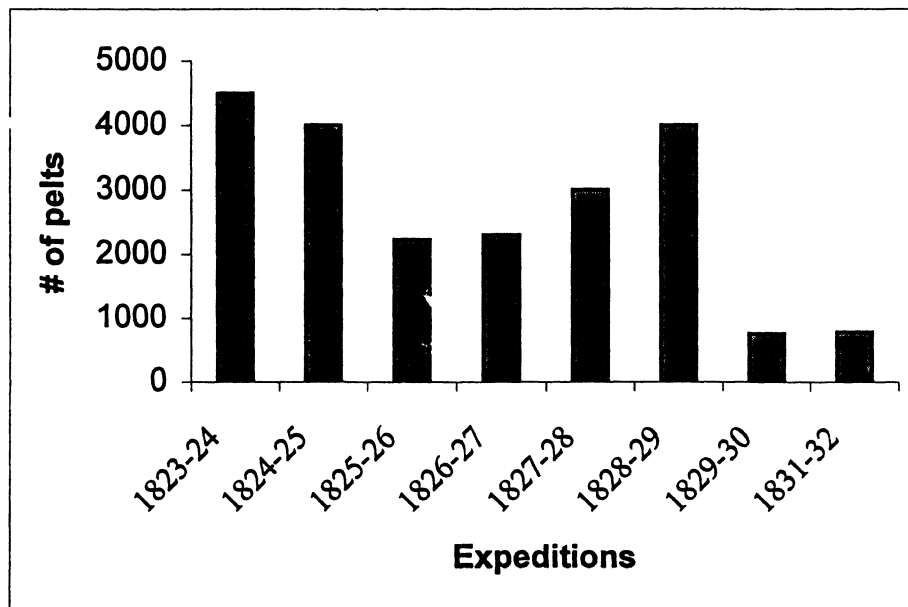


Figure 2.4 Beaver Pelt Returns, 1824-1832¹⁹

It was Alexander Ross who led his 1823-1824 party through Snake Country and trapped the original high of 4500 beaver. By the next expedition, the trappers noticed the

effects. In September 1824, on the Bitterroot River, Ogden noted in his journal that, "this part of the Country tho' once abounding in Beaver is entirely ruined."²⁰ This same sentiment was repeated for other streams and rivers all through the 1820s. At the junction of Emigrant Creek and Sylvies River in northeastern Oregon, Ogden recorded, "We have only one Beaver altho upwards of fifty Traps - our Trappers certainly appear to have clean'd the river well."²¹ In 1831 Chief Factor McLoughlin wrote to George Simpson questioning the viability of another trapping party because the region was too exhausted to enable a party of sufficient defensive strength to trap enough beaver to make it worthwhile.²²

If there remained any doubt that the trappers intended to clear the rivers and streams of beaver, the journals clarify their exact goal for the area. In 1826, at the Owhyhee River, Ogden added this comment to the end of his daily entry: "This day 11 Beaver 1 Otter we have now ruined this quarter we may prepare to start."²³ A couple of weeks later Ogden left the Burnt River because it had, "been examined and now ascertained to be destitute of beaver."²⁴ By 1841 the full effects of the fur desert began to appear in the Columbia District. Still the British remained unwilling to take any rehabilitative measures because, according to Simpson, "In the present unsettled state of the boundary line it would be impolitic to make any attempt to preserve or recruit this once valuable country, as it would attract the attention of the American trappers, so that there is little prospect of any amendment taking place in its affairs."²⁵

The extent to which the Expeditions trapped every possible beaver in Snake Country reveals itself in the ratio of small to large beaver returned by the Expeditions.

During the nearly twenty years of the Expeditions prior to 1841, the year when the vogue of the silk hat first decreased demand for beaver pelts, the HBC trappers took any and all beaver they could. No incentive encouraged them to be selective and look for likely places to trap large beaver. Elsewhere, finding large beaver meant a better investment in time because of the higher prices they brought. The goal and organization of the Snake Country Expeditions, however, encouraged trappers to take any beaver they could find. As a result, small and large beaver ratios roughly reflect the make-up of the population. Not surprisingly, over time the beaver populations in Snake Country became younger (smaller) and more scarce.

The effects of overtrapping show up in the ratios of small to large beaver pelts as early as 1825. That year the return of 3695 pelts had 1210 small and 2485 large pelts, or a ratio of 0.49. Up to 1834, the ratio stayed fairly low, around 0.2 to 0.4. In 1837, the ratio jumped to 0.75 and did not drop below 0.5 until 1843. After that, the population fluctuated highly from year to year, although the exact reason would be hard to determine because of the increased number of factors influencing the trade such as the presence of American settlers, a decrease in the demand for pelts, and a natural variability. Six of the years between 1825 and 1845 exceeded or 0.6 ratio. This contrast sharply with New Caladonia, where returns never exceeded 0.6 during those years.²⁶

The history of the fur trade is often told in terms of European and Euro-American men conquering the wilderness but the Snake Country Expeditions that created the fur desert had far more diverse populations. The trappers and laborers included metis, French-Canadians, Iroquois from the Great Lakes, Abenaki from eastern Canada,

members of other tribes from central Canada and the Northern Rockies, Hawaiians, and Orkney Islanders from northern Scotland, in addition to the British members of the Expeditions. The Company assembled this varied group to go into Snake Country because they could not induce native people, the Northern Shoshone in particular, to trap in the region. No cultural reasons prevented the native inhabitants from participating in the fur trade. It appears that more practical reasons precluded their use as trappers in Snake Country. Among the possible reasons for the native reluctance to trapping was their access to European trade goods through Taos and regional trade centers such as The Dalles. They also grew their own tobacco, one of the staples of the fur trade. Big game thrived in the area, so there was no need to pursue beaver for food. And the Snake Country, particularly the upper Snake, was too remote from the posts to draw Shoshone in to trade or to send Indians out from the vicinity of the posts. As a result, in contrast to most other Company operations, in Snake Country the British trapped the beaver themselves, relying on Company servants and freemen (independent trappers living in the region) to make Snake Country economically unattractive to the Americans.²⁷

The Hudson's Bay Company may not have been so successful as they were in creating a fur desert except that certain characteristics of the brigades made them particularly well suited for the task. Both structural characteristics and the individuals involved strongly influenced their efficiency and effectiveness. In many ways the Snake Country Expeditions, despite their unique purpose, represent the norm for the Hudson's Bay Company, particularly in the relations between the different socioeconomic and ethnic groups and between genders. While the factors separating members of the

Expeditions were different, the nature of these small, nomadic communities was clearly as stratified as British society at home in London. Instead of nobility, gentry, and commoners, the Snake Country Expeditions had officers, engages and freemen. As in British society, women were present and active but hidden as far as official business was concerned.

The officers of the Expeditions held offices such as Chief Factor, Chief Trader or clerk. The Chief Factor of the Columbia District, Dr. John McLoughlin, stayed at Fort Vancouver and managed the whole District. The Chief Traders led the trapping expeditions. Alexander Ross, Peter Skene Ogden, and John Work all held this position. Not only positions of status, officers also received a salary plus a share of the company's profits. These men were nearly universally British or British-Canadian and educated. McLoughlin was a medical doctor and Ogden had started preparation to become a lawyer before entering the fur trade. Although Ogden's and Work's journals are not literary works of art, they do show intelligence and thought. Ensuring that the Expeditions ran smoothly and obtained the maximum number of furs was the officers' principle task. Their ethnicity, education and general ability provided the background the Company felt they needed to lead the Expeditions effectively.²⁸

Below the officers, there were two categories of trappers: engages and freemen. Engages generally came from French-Canadian or another European background, such as the Orkneymen from the Orkney Islands in northern Scotland. Trapping as many pelts as possible was their primary task, except the few men hired as laborers. The Company paid the engages a salary for both their expedition work, such as filling in as the steersman,

and for any pelts they trapped. Unlike the officers, engagés would not be promoted up the ranks. A clerk might become a Chief Trader, but an engagé would not, except in rare cases, become a clerk.²⁹ Engagés may have been salaried employees of the Company, something of an honor, but they were not held in high esteem. Nathaniel Wyeth, an American in the region in the 1830s, clearly understood the position the primarily Canadian engagés held when he wrote,

The Hudson's Bay Company have (sic) a post on the Umbiquoi [Umpqua] river, to which they occasionally send goods, but it can be of little importance, as its business is intrusted (sic) to a common Canadian, which is never done by the Hudson's Bay Company in any case where an important interest is at stake.³⁰

While their potential was limited, life as an engagé was not any worse than eking out a living in the Orkney Islands or working in eastern Canada.³¹

The freemen occupied the next lowest position in the Snake Country social order. This was the most culturally diverse group. Predominately, the men were métis (the descendants of Indian and French unions), Iroquois from the Great Lakes and French-Canadians. In far fewer numbers, there were also Abenaki Indians from eastern Canada, members of other central Canadian and Northern Rockies tribes, and Hawaiians. Canadians, métis, and Iroquois freemen all trapped. Other than the Iroquois, Native Americans joined the Expeditions as laborers. Unlike officers and engagés, the freemen were not paid salaries; they bought their supplies on credit and repaid the Company with pelts. The freemen would be paid for any pelts that surpassed the number owed the Company (usually a theoretical possibility only). This policy directly supported the fur desert policy's objectives, although there is no evidence that this was intentional. A freeman, the perfect agent of the fur desert policy, had every incentive to trap as many

furs as humanly possible because the more he brought back to the fort, the more potential he had to clear a profit.³²

The freemen were in the Columbia District for a number of reasons. These men had married Indian women and chose to stay with them. Some had been taken of the rolls as part of the general streamlining efforts undertaken by Simpson. A large part of the freemen consisted of those who had been dismissed because of unruly or undependable behavior. The Company was not willing to pay these men a salary, but would hire them as freemen. Sylvia Van Kirk, in her history of gender relations in the fur trade, *Many Tender Ties*, argues the primary reason that former North West Company engagés remained in the region and worked as freemen for the Hudson's Bay Company was "loyalty to their Indian families."³³ Iroquois, and others from tribes east of the Rockies, represented the westernmost extent of a population shift caused by the decline of beaver across Canada. These tribes had been involved in the fur trade since the seventeenth century. When faced with a decline in beaver numbers, they moved west to new trapping grounds. By the 1820s, they had made their way to the Columbia District.³⁴

The Hudson's Bay Company needed the freemen to maintain their profits but those who worked with them did not appreciate their role, but instead viewed them as a necessary evil. Simpson's journal provides a vivid example of the officers' views of the freemen. He wrote,

When such a worthless and motley crew are collected together lying idle for Four Months on end they are forming plots and quarreling with the Natives and exposing themselves and us to much trouble and danger. This band of Freemen the very scum of the country and generally outcasts from the service for misconduct are the most unruly and troublesome gang to deal with in this or perhaps any other part of the world.³⁵

While Simpson viewed them as a threat to company interests, Ogden worried they would be a danger to themselves. In 1827, while traveling through hostile Indian country, Ogden asked that the Freemen in the rear of the party keep up but, he wrote, "This warning I constantly repeat to them every time we meet but I believe of no avail careless as they always have been and so will they remain *jusque a la mort*."³⁶ One has to wonder how accurate this portrayal of the freemen is, considering the class and ethnicity consciousness of the writers. Even if it is accurate, the question still remains whether their unruliness was an inherent character flaw or because they had little to lose by not complying with the officers' expectations and even less to gain. Interestingly, the officers never complained about the freemen's trapping ability or returns.

Perhaps more important than any amount of unruliness or carelessness in influencing the officers' view of the freemen was their propensity to desert the Expeditions in the early years. The Hudson's Bay Company's practice of selling goods to freemen on credit included a catch: the prices charged the trappers were obscenely high. Their monopoly in the region enabled them to maintain a large labor pool at a minimum price because there was no competition with whom the freemen could trade. Thus, when the Americans entered the region they easily induced freemen to join their camps and bring all their furs with them.³⁷ In May 1825 Ogden failed to prevent twelve trappers from deserting to an American trapping party led by John Gardner. In response to Ogden's arguments, a trapper named Montour said, "Go we will where we shall be paid for our furs and not be imposed and not cheated as we are in the Columbia."³⁸ In order to gain access to the American prices, a few days after Montour and the other eleven

freemen deserted to the Americans, three more men left, leaving their wives, children, horses and furs. In 1826 John McLoughlin addressed this issue by adjusting the prices charged and paid the freemen and sending a higher percentage of engagés on the Expedition.³⁹

These three classes of fur traders, the officers, the engages, and the freeman comprise the official components of the Snake Country Expeditions, and the British fur trade in North America generally. What has been left out of the official journals, documents, and most histories is the active role native and métis women played.

The full details of the women's presence were not included in the Expeditions' journals and documents but some information can be gleaned from the texts and some can be drawn from other histories of the fur trade. While nearly all of the men were married at some point to Indian women, it is not entirely clear if all wives accompanied the Expeditions. Peter Skene Ogden was married to Julia Rivet, a Nez Perce woman, but she is never mentioned in his journals. Work's wife, a métis woman named Josette accompanied his Expedition in the early 1830s though his journals do not make that clear. The engagés and freemen also brought their wives but it is not clear if all the men that were married brought their wives. For example, Ross' 1823-24 Expedition listed 55 men and 25 women (and, interestingly, 64 children). The issue is further muddled by the instances when the documents indicate that no women were allowed with the group when there is evidence they were indeed present. Ogden denied the presence of women in 1825 but when he wrote about the women digging camas roots on the Snake River Plain, he wondered why the natives did not collect the root. If the local Indian women were not

collecting the roots, the only other possibility is that women connected with his group were doing so.⁴⁰

Because fur trade society lacked the separation of spheres that European society maintained, women married to fur trappers maintained an "integral socio-economic role." This role included a broad range of possible activities. Throughout the fur trade women were responsible for making moccasins, snowshoes, and pemmican, for pitching tents, drying meat, collecting berries and helping carry supplies and pelts. In the Columbia District, women caught and dried salmon and collected wappittoo root in addition to the other tasks already mentioned.⁴¹

Of the tasks women performed for the Expeditions, Ogden only recognized dressing furs in his journals. This was probably due in large part to the nature of European society in which the governing committee existed and from which the officers came. During the early nineteenth century men's and women's lives in the middle and upper classes of British society began to separate into public and private spheres. Officers either took for granted women's activities that did not contribute directly to finances, or they could have been tailoring the facts from their expeditions to what the Committee would want to know, which would not include what the women were doing.

Perhaps the most economically important task women handled was dressing furs. Ogden acknowledge the women's role and their skill when he wrote, "It is a pleasure to observe the Ladys (sic) of the Camp vieing (sic) with each other who will produce on their return to Fort Vancouver the cleanest and best dress'd Beaver."⁴² Milan Novak, a fur-bearer manager for the Ontario Bureau of Natural Resources, wrote that, in his

experience, the fastest someone could skin, clean, and stretch a beaver pelt for drying was one-half hour. For the women on the Snake Country Expeditions, that meant if the traps brought in 52 beaver, as they did on 12 May 1825 on the Little Bear River, it would take approximately twenty-six hours of labor to process the pelts.⁴³

The lack of information about women limits our understanding of the role they played in the fur desert policy. Women most likely influenced the efficiency and effectiveness of the Expeditions. Considering the variety of time-consuming tasks they fulfilled, an absence of women would have slowed the Expeditions' pace and limited the overall distance they covered. Ogden's Expeditions would not have reached what is today Ogden, Utah had their pace been slowed by the triple burden of trapping, dressing pelts, and performing daily tasks that would have been placed on the trappers. An enormous amount of land would have been left to a later year. In the meantime, the slower pace and reduced efficiency would have given trapped areas more time to recover. The impact of the fur desert policy would be a distinctly different story had the officers, engages, and freemen been obliged to rely entirely on their own energy.

The Snake Country Expeditions also capitalized on the biology of beaver in their "success" with the fur desert policy. The lodges that beaver lived in and the dams they built made them easy to find in the forest. Trappers did not have to search for beaver; if they were there, they left plenty of evidence. Also, once the trapper placed a trap baited with castoreum, a substance secreted by glands on the beaver with a scent that is unique to each individual, the beaver would have to overcome its instincts to resist the attraction. Beaver are extremely territorial and scents left by other beaver alarm them. Only the most

shy, or wild, animals resisted this urge, which led to the situation south of present-day Ola, Idaho when Ogden remarked in 1827, "The trappers complain the few beaver there are very wild."⁴⁴ By selecting out the bold beaver, the trappers left "wild" or shy beaver that made up the remnant population. The "wild" beaver largely saved the population from complete extirpation. The nature of beaver mating and reproduction also gave the Company a hand in clearing Snake Country of beaver. By taking all the beaver they could entice into their traps during the winter and spring, the trappers created an entirely different situation than the one in which the beaver evolved. Beaver life history reflected the relatively few numbers they lost to predators prior to the trappers. Kits in their first winter and beaver older than ten to eleven years had the highest mortality rates, mostly due to stresses caused by environmental conditions. Birds and mammals, such as eagles and wolves, preyed on kits and two-year-olds, as they dispersed to new colonies, but the predation rate was generally low.⁴⁵

This low rate of predation did not result from a lack of interest on the predators' behalf. As the trappers could attest, beaver meat was both tasty and nutritious. The beaver protected themselves from exposure to those that wanted to eat them through a number of strategies. Ponds protected them from predators that could not swim underwater. The occasional otter that swam to the lodge entrance could be dispatched with the beaver's magnificent teeth. When their ponds froze over, the mating pair could copulate and give birth in nearly complete safety. Furthermore, kits could be protected in the lodge until they learned to dive and swim to protect themselves. The security of the lodge and pond allowed the beaver to maintain monogamous mating relationships and to produce

relatively few offspring. The beaver pair, unlike other rodents known for their prodigious reproduction rates and low rate of survival to maturity, invested their energy in raising their low number of offspring to subadulthood.

In the spring and early summer, the male brought the bulk of the female and kits' food to them in the lodge. Leaving the pond to gather food exposed the beaver to a higher risk of predation. Also in the spring, two to three year olds began the process of dispersing to establish their own colonies. If death befell the male during his food or dam material runs, he could be replaced by one of the dispersing subadults. Because the females established and maintained the lodges, the new male could simply be incorporated into the colony as a new mate. If the female died, however, the rest of the colony generally abandoned the site. In either case, the time of highest danger from predation, spring and summer, was also the time of easiest replacement or resettlement.⁴⁶

The HBC trappers descended upon the streams and rivers in Snake Country in the late winter and early spring to catch the beaver with their pelts in prime winter condition. They upset this seasonal pattern of high and low risk periods. No longer did the ponds protect the beaver, they only made their locations more obvious. The trappers took the adults and the dispersing subadults that might have replaced them.

Trapping in the late winters and early springs the Company did the most damage possible to the populations due to the loss of litters. Beaver only produce one litter per year of two-four kits, on average. Taking the beaver from February to May invariably meant taking pregnant females. Ogden noted the devastating effect their timing had on the populations in May 1829 at Bull Run Creek near Bull Run and Tuscarora Mountains:

It is scarcely credible what a destruction of beaver by trapping this season, within the last few days upwards of fifty females have been taken and on an average each with four young ready to litter. Did not we hold this country by so slight a tenure it would be most to our interest to trap only in the fall, and by this mode it would take many years to ruin it.⁴⁷

While Ogden grasped the short-term consequences, he did not ever remark upon the long-term consequences of taking every possible beaver out of each colony. First, female beaver do not produce a constant litter size over their lifetimes. They reach the peak of their fertility around six to seven years and have smaller and fewer litters both before and after. Trapping mature females indiscriminately skewed the age structure to a higher number of young females. Not only did these females produce smaller litters, but they were also more likely to die before reaching their peak years because the energy the young females put into reproduction at age three, when they are first sexually mature, should have gone into their own growth until age four, when females begin to breed in an unexploited colony. Thus, soon in the fur desert policy's implementation, young females were carrying the brunt of breeding and were less likely to survive harsh weather, poor food quality, or other environmental stresses. Further, when females were trapped between May and July, after giving birth, the kits were still nursing. If it was late enough in the spring, they may have switched to a regular beaver diet. But, if the mother was lost before the kits were one to two months old, the change may have been too abrupt and the litter, or part of it, was probably lost.⁴⁸

Beaver are born open-eyed, ready to swim, and with an instinct to stop water rushing through their dam. Yet they stay in the parental colony as non-mating subadults for two to three years (depending largely on the availability of open territory for

dispersal). While there is no consensus among biologists, it appears that these two years give the subadults time to learn. This learning includes experimenting with ways to build and repair dams or felling and dragging trees back to the pond. This experience may not be necessary for survival, but it might make survival more likely. By denying the subadults this time with the adults, before they needed to establish and maintain their own territories, the trappers probably affected the future survival rates of those few beaver they left in the lodges.⁴⁹

Other factors also may have contributed to the expeditions "success" with the fur desert policy. Climate, particularly the relative wetness of the 1820s and 1830s, would have affected the beaver population levels and their rebound from overtrapping. Beaver need water for their protection, for the vegetation it supports, and as living space under the ice during the winter. Dendroclimatological reconstructions indicate that temperatures in the 1820s were generally lower than twentieth century averages and that most of the Snake River region received lower rainfall rates. Only the southwestern corner and midsection of Idaho (around Lewiston) and northeastern Oregon had high rainfall rates. Significantly, the Snake River basin and eastern Oregon, already very dry regions, received lower than average rainfall. Pollen counts in eastern Oregon, at Diamond Craters, reveal a decrease in juniper and grasses and an increase in sagebrush. This and the dendroclimatological evidence indicate the region experienced higher temperatures and less rainfall in the last 100 years. This is consistent with the North American trends at the end of the Little Ice Age around 1850. The effect of these changes on beaver went unrecorded. It can be speculated, however, that lower precipitation would

mean less water for vegetation and ponding behind dams. As temperatures warmed, and precipitation decreased, more stress may have been placed on beaver, thus influencing their ability to rebound from the Snake River brigades and prolonging their absence from the streams and rivers.⁵⁰

Lower water levels, even on the short term, made beaver more susceptible to epizootics and predators. Disease or fire might have further reduced beaver numbers in Snake Country. Epizootics, such as tularemia, can kill entire colonies. Tularemia is a native disease that is always present in beaver ponds. Low water causes higher concentrations of the disease to build up and increases chances of beaver contracting it. Fires, too can kill beaver, burn their food supply and building materials, and leave them unable to survive the winter. The journals do not give any indication of droughts, which would encourage both epizootics and fire due to lack of water.⁵¹ However, while trapping in eastern Oregon Ogden came upon a scene that indicates something caused problems for beaver populations. According to John McLoughlin, on the Crooked River near Beaver Creek Ogden, "travelled several days among remains of dams and lodges now mostly destroyed by fire, but whether fire destroyed the Beaver or disease he cannot say."⁵² It is possible epizootics had weakened populations prior to the Snake Country Expeditions, but there is no indication that whatever Ogden found caused major threats to beaver on a regional level during the 1820s and 1830s.

Americans also aided the British in creating the fur desert. In the eastern reaches of Snake Country, particularly in what is now Idaho, the Americans actively pursued every last beaver, as the British did. They acted not according to a policy such as the fur

desert but in self interest. Ogden continually saw the effects of their parties. When he sent some of his trappers to the source of the Blackfeet River in Idaho in 1825 hoping to find abundant beaver he remarked upon their lack of success that, "it appears that quarter have been trapped by the Americans last year."⁵³ Apparently irritated, Ogden made the following puzzling statement: "but few traps in the Water the Americans have taken nearly all the Beaver they are a Selfish Set they leave nothing for their Friends we act differently."⁵⁴ There is no obvious explanation for his remarks, unless Ogden suffered from a remarkable blindness to his own motives and intentions, but it does show how effective the Americans were in their trapping efforts. Six years later, on the 1831-32 Expedition, John Work assumed Americans had trapped out the upper reaches of a creek he passed.⁵⁵

Across Snake Country, from the Big Lost River in present-day Idaho to the Little Applegate River in what is now southwestern Oregon, native people also exerted pressure on the beaver populations. It is not clear from the journals or from tribal cultural traditions, if these tribes trapped beaver for their own use or for trade, but it is clear they took a significant number from the streams. Ogden blamed the Piegan Indians for ruining a small stream near what is now Camas Creek in Idaho.⁵⁶ Later, on the Crooked River, Ogden estimated, "If this River had not been visited by the Fort Nez Percee (sic) Indians it would have yielded from 4 to 500 beaver."⁵⁷ When the 1826-1827 Snake Expedition to the Klamath Lake region arrived, the local people had already trapped out the Little Applegate River.⁵⁸

Finally, the Expeditions succeeded at creating a fur desert in part because some

areas did not support beaver colonies, as Ogden found out on the southern side of the Snake River in 1826. By trapping out the areas between these "bare" spots, the buffer zone slowly grew to encompass the entire region that now includes southern Idaho, southwestern Washington, eastern Oregon, and parts of western Montana.

Did the Expeditions fulfill their purpose? In the short term, they prevented extensive American entrance into the region. While in the early 1830s there were 500 to 600 American trappers in Snake Country, by 1836 those numbers had declined to one party, led by Nathaniel Wyeth.⁵⁹ This success came at a price to the HBC. Wyeth wrote a memorial to Congress in 1836 which provides an estimate what that price might have been to the Company. He stated that the fur trade in the Columbia District brought in \$138,000 but cost about \$20,000 in supplies, the services of 350 men, shipping costs, and a loss of two years interest on the investment because of the turnaround time between London and the Columbia District. As a result, Wyeth argued, "notwithstanding the great disparity of the money value of the articles exchanged in this trade, that it has been less profitable than any other in which as much danger of life and property is incurred."⁶⁰ The British may have succeeded in clearing the country and excluding the Americans, but not without some disadvantages to themselves.

Surprisingly, the Americans, for all their discussion of the Oregon Question, never seemed to fully grasp what the HBC intended to do with the region. Trappers in the Northern Rockies certainly realized the Company had taken nearly all the beaver. Nathaniel Wyeth, trying to establish fur trade operations in 1832, wrote in his journal,

We moved in a W. by S. direction about 15 miles to a creek putting into Lewis [Snake] River on which we found no beaver of consequence having been

trap[p]ed out by the Hudson's Bay Company some years before.⁶¹

William Ashley wrote to Thomas Hart Benton, an important Congressional supporter of the American claim to Oregon, in 1827 about the rivers and streams of what is now southern Idaho and western Montana. He complained, "That the same water courses did, when first trapped, furnish double the quantity of furs in the same time, with the same labor, I have not the least doubt."⁶² It did not require much skill to determine that beaver did not live in the waterways of Snake Country in any numbers by the late 1820s, but the Americans did not connect the lack of beaver with any concerted policy to exclude them from anything more than the profits.

Americans' concerns voiced to Congress addressed a number of issues. Foremost among these, the Hudson's Bay Company's advantage as a monopoly contradicted the American system of allowing any company to try their luck in the fur trade. Joshua Pilcher wrote to J.H. Eaton in 1833 that the HBC was "rich in wealth, strong in power, and efficient in its organization. It is second only to the East India Company, and, like it, has immense territories and innumerable tribes of natives, besides its own proper strength, under its command."⁶³ The HBC did enjoy a considerable advantage as a result of their monopoly. They could undersell and outbid any smaller company that tried to compete with them. Thomas Hart Benton claimed in his memoirs to have recognized this danger when he first read the Convention of 1818. He wrote in 1883, "I no sooner saw it [the Convention of 1818] than I saw its delusive nature - its one-sidedness - and the whole disastrous consequences which were to result from it to the United States."⁶⁴ He quoted from his own article written after he read the Convention:

The fur trade is the object. It will fare with our traders on the Columbia as it fared with on the Miami of the Lakes (and on the lakes themselves), under the British treaties of '94 and '96, which admitted British traders into our territories. Our traders will be driven out; and that by the fair competition of trade, even if there should be no foul play. The difference between free and dutied goods, would work that result. The British traders pay no duties: ours pay above an average of fifty per centum.⁶⁵

Americans do not seem to have realized the Company's fear of opposition, no matter how small. The mere possibility of competition in Snake Country motivated the fur desert policy more than any other factor.

Americans also declared the danger of Company influence of Indians in the Northwest had and would cause innumerable dangers and problems for settlers and businesses in the Oregon Country. Considering the problems caused by European influence over tribes in the East following the Revolutionary War, their concern may have been justified. Joshua Pilcher, a fur trader, wrote to Eaton to warn him of the influence the HBC had with Native Americans in Snake Country. However, they carried their rhetoric to extremes.⁶⁶ Thomas Hart Benton argued for one reason the British should be expelled from Oregon:

The losses already sustained by our citizens from the ravages of Indians, incited against them by the British Hudson's Bay company, were stated by Mr. Linn upon good authority, to be five hundred men in lives taken in the first ten years of the joint occupation treaty, and a half a million of dollars in property robbed or destroyed, besides getting exclusive possession of our soil, and the command of our own Indians within our own limits.⁶⁷

The fact that no evidence supported these claims of losses did not stop Benton or John C. Calhoun from using them to vilify the Company. In 1843, Calhoun bemoaned the dominance of the Company in the Northwest and exclaimed,

Nay, indeed, no traders! For they have disappeared before foreign competition; or

fallen a sacrifice to the rifle, tomahawk, or the scalping knife or those savages whom the Hudson Bay Company can always make the instruments of systematic massacre of adventurous rivals.⁶⁸

Finally, the agricultural potential of Oregon Country attracted the attention of all Americans. Nathaniel Wyeth, fur trader, and the Protestant missionaries, among others, knew the territory well enough to encourage others to go west to farm the land. More than the fur trade, land not yet settled by white Americans or Europeans drew American attention to the Oregon Question. In 1837, Peter Skene Ogden wrote to John McLeod about the Columbia District. He conveyed the cost of the trade and some irritation at the latest American arrivals. He wrote,

There are also five more Gent as follows: 2 in quest of Flowers 2 killing all the Birds in the Columbia & 1 in quest of rocks and stones all these bucks came with letters from the President of the U. States and you know it would not be good policy not to treat them politely they are a perfect nuisance.⁶⁹

Emigration to Oregon Country began in 1841 and Americans totaled about 5500 by 1845. The Hudson's Bay Company continued to trap in the region but not with the same policy and with far less success. As long as the dispute turned only on the fur trade, the Company had nothing to fear. However, once American settlement started, the advantage shifted to the American side.⁷⁰

The importance of agriculture to the Americans may explain the lack of attention paid to what the HBC tried to do in Snake Country. In the 1826 document that extended the Convention of 1818 indefinitely, until one country or the other gave one year's notice of wanting to settle the boundary issue, not one mention of HBC practices occurs.⁷¹ Even when letters pointing out how thoroughly the British dominated the trade arrived in Washington, DC little debate ensued. In 1827, William H. Ashley wrote to Thomas Hart

Benton to share an entirely exaggerated boast with the Senator:

Mr. Ogden, who had charge of that party [Snake Country Expedition] informed Mr. [Jedediah] Smith [at Flathead Post in 1824-1825], rather exultingly, that his party, composed of about sixty men, had taken, during their operations in the district claimed by the Snake Indians, (a small portion of our territory West of the Rocky Mountains) eighty five thousand beaver.⁷²

A couple of years later, Ashley, David E. Jackson, and William Sublette wrote to J.H.

Eaton to convey that,

They [HBC] do not trap north of latitude 49 degrees, but confine that business to the territory of the United States. Thus this territory, being trapped by both parties, is nearly exhausted of beaver, and unless the British can be stopped, will soon be entirely exhausted.⁷³

Still, no substantial response came from the United States.

With their focus on diplomatic disputes and agriculture, the Americans in the eastern United States hardly noticed what the British fur traders intended to do in Snake Country. But the fur desert policy would profoundly influence the land they wanted so badly; the removal of the beaver had far-reaching environmental and human consequences.

Notes

- ¹ Journal entry, 13 June 1826, at Owhyhee River, in Rich, *Ogden's Snake Country Journals, 1824-26*, 184.
- ² Journal entry, 21 May 1826, at Lower Salmon Falls, in *Ibid.*, 168.
- ³ 1 March 1825 to 30 June 1825, in *Ibid.*, 26-65.
- ⁴ Billington, *Westward Expansion: A History of the American Frontier*, 455.; Ross, *Fur Hunters of the Far West*, 154.; Wells, "Introduction," 24.
- ⁵ Merk, *Fur Trade and Empire*, 46.
- ⁶ Binns, *Peter Skene Ogden*, 19-20.; Cline, *Peter Skene Ogden and the Hudson's Bay Company*, 13.
- ⁷ Cline, *Peter Skene Ogden and the Hudson's Bay Company*, 13-14, 15ff.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 33, 37, 39.
- ⁹ Journal entry, 16 January 1825, near Lost Trail Pass, in Rich, *Ogden's Snake Country Journals, 1824-26*, 256.
- ¹⁰ Journal entry, 1 October 1825, at Big Lost River, in Rich, *Ogden's Snake Country Journals, 1824-26*, 85.
- ¹¹ Journal entry, 2 May 1825, at small tributary to the Bear River, in Rich, *Ogden's Snake Country Journals, 1824-26*, 42.
- ¹² Journal entry, 16 January 1825, near Lost Trail Pass, in Rich, *Ogden's Snake Country Journals, 1824-26*, 256.
- ¹³ Journal entry, 16 August 1825, confluence of Flint Creek and Clark Fork River, in Rich, *Ogden's Snake Country Journals, 1824-26*, 73-74.
- ¹⁴ Francis D. Haines, Jr., *The Snake Country Expedition of 1830-1831* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971): 94-143.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, xx-xxi, 31-32, 55, 62.
- ¹⁶ Archibald McDonald, Fort Langely, to Edward Ermatinger, 20 February 1833, Box 1/3, Edmond S. Meany Papers, Acc. 1949, University of Washington Libraries. Typescript of original in British Columbia Provincial Archives.

¹⁷ Journal entries, 30 January 1832, at Birch Creek, and 14 March 1832, on the Salmon River, in William S. Lewis and Paul C. Phillips, eds. *The Journal of John Work: A Chief Trader of the Hudson's Bay Company During His Expedition from Vancouver to the Flatheads and Blackfeet of the Pacific Northwest* (Cleveland: The Arthur H. Clarke Company, 1923): 127, 137.

¹⁸ Fur trade returns for Columbia and New Caledonia districts.; Merk, *Fur Trade and Empire*, 44, 280.; Rich, *Ogden's Snake Country Journals, 1824-26*, 256.; Cline, *Peter Skene Ogden and the Hudson's Bay Company*, 85.; Davies, *Peter Skene Ogden's Snake Country Journal, 1826-1827*, 109.; Meinig, *The Great Columbia Plain*, 88.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Journal entry, 28 September 1824, at Bitterroot River, Rich, *Ogden's Snake Country Journals, 1824-26*, 9.

²¹ Journal entry, 21 October 1826, at Emigrant Creek, in Davies, *Peter Skene Ogden's Snake Country Journal, 1826-1827*, 16.

²² Merk, *Fur Trade*, 44.; Burt Brown Barker, ed. *Letters of Dr. John McLoughlin: Written at Fort Vancouver, 1829-1832* (Portland, OR: Binfords and Mort for the Oregon Historical Society, 1948): 185.

²³ Journal entry, 13 June 1826, at Owhyhee River, in Rich, *Ogden's Snake Country Journals, 1824-26*, 184.

²⁴ Peter Skene Ogden, Burnt River, to George Simpson, 1 July 1826, quoted in Merk, *Fur Trade*, 274.

²⁵ George Simpson, Fort Vancouver, to Governor and Committee, 25 November 1841, in Joseph Schafer, "The Letters of Sir George Simpson, 1841-1843," in *American Historical Review* XIV (October 1908): 73.

²⁶ Donald R. Johnson, interview, Worley, Idaho, 21 June 1997, notes in possession of the author.; Donald R. Johnson and David H. Chance, "Presettlement Overharvest of Upper Columbia River Beaver Populations," *Canadian Journal of Zoology* 52 (1974): 1521.

²⁷ Ross, *Fur Hunters of the Far West*, 193, 208-209.; Wells, "Introduction," 23.; Charles E. Simpson, "The Snake Country Freeman, British Free Trappers in Idaho" (M.A. thesis, University of Idaho, 1990): 34.; Stern, *Chiefs and Chief Traders*, 89.; Keith Lawrence, letter.

²⁸ Merk, *Fur Trade*, xiii.; Cline, *Peter Skene Ogden*, 11.

²⁹ Merk, *Fur Trade*, xvi.

- ³⁰ U.S. House. 25th Congress, 2nd Session, *Territory of Oregon* (H. Doc. 101), (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1839): 20.
- ³¹ Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties*, 11.
- ³² Merk, *Fur Trade*, 56.; Alexander Ross, *The Fur Hunters of the Far West*, 208-209.
- ³³ Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties*, 48.
- ³⁴ Rich, *Ogden's Snake Country Journals, 1824-26*, xl.; Innis, *The Fur Trade in Canada: An Introduction to Canadian Economic History*, 264.; Arthur J. Ray, "Some Conservation Schemes of the Hudson's Bay Company, 1821-50: An Examination of the Problems of Resource Management in the Fur Trade," in *Journal of Historical Geography* 1 (1975): 50.
- ³⁵ Merk, *Fur Trade*, 45.
- ³⁶ Journal entry, 12 February 1827, at Little Applegate River, in Davies, *Peter Skene Ogden's Snake Country Journal, 1826-1827*, 75.
- ³⁷ Rich, *Ogden's Snake Country Journals, 1824-26*, xliv-lvii.
- ³⁸ Journal entry, 25 May 1825, at Ogden River, in *Ibid.*, 54.
- ³⁹ Journal entry, 29 May 1825, near Ogden River, in *Ibid.*, 56.; Rich, *Hudson's Bay Company*, vol. III, 593.
- ⁴⁰ Cline, *Peter Skene Ogden*, 29.; Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties*, 134.; Ross, *Fur Hunters*, 209.; Journal entry, 14 June 1826, near Blue Creek, in Rich, *Ogden's Snake Country Journals, 1824-26*, 186.
- ⁴¹ Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties*, 4, 54-58, 61.; Rich, *Ogden's Snake Country Journals, 1824-26*, xl.
- ⁴² Journal entry, 13 February 1827, at Little Applegate River, in Davies, *Peter Skene Ogden's Snake Country Journal, 1826-1827*, 76.
- ⁴³ Journal entry, 12 May 1825, at the Little Bear River, in Rich, *Ogden's Snake Country Journals, 1824-26*, 46.; Novak, *The Beaver in Ontario*, 16.
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Chapter Three

“A few good winters [without the beaver], and the streams went to hell.”

-Lew Pence, U.S. Soil Conservation Service ¹

Change did not suddenly begin occurring in the Pacific Northwest in 1823, when the first Snake Country Expedition started out from Flathead Post. It did not start when the first Europeans scouted along the coast in the 1770's and introduced trade goods and disease to the people living in present-day British Columbia. Not even the first humans who settled the Columbia Basin about 10,000 years ago could claim they started the processes of change in the Northwest. The geology, climate, vegetation, and animals have all continually evolved over time that stretches back beyond imagination. The fur desert policy represents not the advent of change on the Columbia Plateau, but instead one layer in the transformation of humans' relationship with the land in the region. The native communities also altered and exploited the land, but the Europeans, backed by their technology and market ethic, caused large-scale changes in the land more rapidly and for different reasons than any other people before them. The long-term consequences of the fur desert policy contributed to the overall changes in the landscape and the local cultures that are visible today.

Beaver repopulation in Snake Country has been uneven. Some argue that the current population is merely 10% of precontact numbers, while others, especially in areas where beaver have become “nuisances,” would say they are back in full force.

Unfortunately, no study, or even a written account of beaver in Snake Country exists for

the nineteenth century. What is certain, however, is that human activities have limited their rebound. Lew Pence, formerly of the U.S. Soil Conservation Service in Gooding, Idaho believes that the lack of beaver is a missing link in Idaho ecosystems and he blames humans for their absence. Pence cites the fur trapping done by the HBC and others in the early nineteenth century and later trapping. Beaver populations have been kept low since the fur trade era due to trapping in response to periodic increases in prices for pelts or individual beaver colonies causing problems for landowners or roads. As farmers drained wetlands and repressed the regrowth of trees along streambanks, habitat declined also. Their rebound must have been slowed somewhat in contrast to what it might have been without these human pressures. In other areas of Snake Country, beaver may have rebounded to a greater extent than in southern Idaho. Generally, where people have been excluded, or in more hospitable habitats, beaver populations have had better, but limited, success at returning to their old habitats.²

An educated guess as to how long it took for the beaver to increase substantially is several decades. On Isle Royale, a national park on Lake Superior, the beaver population increased from “very scarce” to about 1100 beaver in forty years, without any trapping pressure. That is a substantial amount of time for the plants and animals that rely on the beaver’s activities for water, food and habitat. While the complete picture of environmental change following European contact involves a variety of activities and processes, a look at the beaver’s role in ecosystems reveals the probable consequences of trapping them to near extirpation. The beaver’s absence undoubtedly led to significant

changes in the region's riparian communities.³

The beaver is a keystone species, one of those critical animals that determines community structure. Although they do not directly affect other animal species through predation, they do affect which animal and plant species can live in an area through their impact on the physical and biological structures of riparian zones. Beaver have been shown to influence the “biogeochemical cycles, nutrient retention, geomorphology, biodiversity, community dynamics, and structural complexity” of their ecosystems.⁴ Their dambuilding and foraging had far-reaching consequences for Snake Country.

The very streambanks the Hudson's Bay men stood upon as they set their traps would not be the same after the local beaver fell for the ever-effective castoreum bait. The most basic effect beaver can have on a stream is impoundment. Dams affect two separate processes that involve the soil on the sides of the stream and in the water. The first, reducing erosion, results from the alteration of the stream channel. Dams create ponds behind them and a series of dams, built by the same or several family groups, results in a more gradual stream slope. While the actual channel remains the same, the way the water moves over it changes. Instead of a headlong rush to the ocean, the ponds force the water to dawdle. This “stair-step profile” reduces velocity and, therefore, the water's ability to erode the sides and bottom of the stream channel.⁵

Beaver dam breaks can cause disturbances that bring temporarily higher erosion and can kill the small organisms on the stream bottom and fish eggs. However, the dam failures also open up the stream to fish migration. Channel scour by the rush of pond water creates bare areas, preparing them for plants requiring recently disturbed ground,

such as certain species of willows. However, these events are relatively isolated and infrequent. Beaver dams so effectively reduce erosion in streambanks that ranchers and wildlife managers have begun to use them to repair riparian areas damaged by grazing.⁶

The second soil process affected by beaver dams, sedimentation, also relates to how dams reduce stream velocity. Lower velocity reduces the stream's sediment carrying power. As the waterflow slows in the pond, the sediments drop to the pond bottom and accumulate over time. When the beaver move on to establish a new colony, usually due to the exhaustion of local food resources, the pond eventually drains when the untended dam weakens and leaks or breaks. The exposed sediment is then available to terrestrial plant life. One group of researchers studying beaver in a boreal forest in Minnesota found that ponds and the meadows that result from them are "patches of high standing stocks of ions and nutrients in surface organic profiles and, for nitrogen, in plant-available forms."⁷ Over 61 years, at one of the ponds studied in Minnesota, nutrients in the soil increased dramatically. Nitrates (NO_3) increased 208%, Calcium 137%, and Magnesium 169%. These substances did not accumulate from the beaver directly, but from how the animals move nutrients into ponds by decreased water velocity and plant decomposition, accumulate it over the lives of their ponds, and then make it available to the plants when the pond drains and the rich soil is exposed. The grasses and shrubs that benefit from the sedimentation complete the process by making the soil less likely to erode from between their roots.⁸

In the absence of large numbers of dams, erosion rates have remained significantly high in Snake Country since the 1820s. Extensive cattle grazing, beginning

in the 1840s and 1850s ensured that the maximum effects of the fur desert policy would be experienced. Moreover, in the 1970s as ranchers shifted from sheep to cattle over much of the grazing lands of Idaho, the situation worsened, according to Lew Pence. In contrast to sheep that can be herded into uplands, cattle wallow in the streams, trampling the vegetation and eating the new willow shoots down to the nubs. Many riparian areas have not had the opportunity to repair themselves with or without the beaver's aid because of grazing pressure. As a result, the amount of fertile ground had decreased over the last 170 years as the rate of soil moving downstream has increased and the amount deposited by sedimentation has decreased.⁹

Water quality also changes as it stands in beaver ponds and passes through dams. Larger rivers, such as the Clearwater and the Snake, had higher water quality because less silt left streambanks that were protected by beaver dams. The chemical composition also changed because of beaver ponds. Studies done on water in forest streams in the Adirondack Mountains before and after it passed through a beaver dam showed that acidity declined, as did dissolved oxygen, while the acid neutralizing capacity and the dissolved organic carbon increased. Similarly, in a stream study in Oregon, ponded areas had higher concentrations of nutrients and higher rates of benthic primary production. Lower acidity and increased oxygen and nutrients improved the stream as habitat for insect larvae and other microorganisms. Fish populations rely on these food sources and their numbers decline in streams with excessively high acidity or low nutrient levels.¹⁰

Most importantly for the semi-arid Snake Country, with beaver in place, winter runoff stayed in Snake Country longer before sliding off through valleys and canyons to

the Columbia River and the Pacific Ocean. The ponds kept the runoff at higher elevations longer. The volume of water released to lower elevations was more evenly distributed over the course of the year. This complemented the already reduced levels of erosion discussed above.¹¹

The amount of water retained directly depended on how many beaver were building dams. Over time, as the number of colonies declined in Snake Country, less ponds were built and maintained to hold the water in the region. In the spring of 1831 streams ran unusually high. John Work's expedition came across streams where prior expeditions had only found dry beds. A direct connection between trapping, beaver dam failures, and higher water at lower elevations can not be conclusively proven, but overtrapping most likely contributed to the situation Work experienced. Beaver numbers had declined sharply by the 1830s. The Snake Country Expedition followed much of the same circuit in 1830-31 as Ogden had in 1827-28. From the area where Ogden had trapped 3093 beaver, Work could only bring in 866.¹²

Retained water did not only stay in the pond or streambed. Some soaked into the streambanks and raised the overall amount of surface water available to plants. In a region where evapotranspiration averaged between 24 and 36 inches, evaporation rates varied from 28 to 42 inches, and precipitation could be as low as ten inches per year and only as high as 60 inches in the mountains, water retention was crucial. Though the ponds increased surface evaporation, the decreased loss to runoff outweighed that disadvantage.¹³

Studies in Wyoming and Colorado have looked into the consequences of beaver's

presence and absence for hydrological systems. Frederic J. Athearn wrote a survey of the situation, past and present, on the White River in Colorado. He found that trapping had nearly cleared the area of beaver and riparian areas along the river had declined. He saw the loss of riparian areas as the result of the lack of beaver and several other causes, such as “lowered water table, removal of an undergrowth by ranchers, increased soil erosion due to lack of cover vegetation, and other manmade modifications that caused permanent changes along the White.” Athearn does not connect these other causes to the beaver, but they would have influenced or worsened the consequences, such as increased erosion following the removal of the undergrowth by ranchers. In southwestern Wyoming, a Rock Creek District (of the Bureau of Land Management) study project attempted to address riparian degradation issues on two creeks. Dams built by reintroduced beaver did not solve all of the problems on these creeks, but they did cause decreased erosion and increased sedimentation on which riparian vegetation could be reestablished. The BLM staff provided some building materials, but the beaver did most of the work on their own. Through their activities, beaver influenced nearly all aspects of the physical structure of the riparian community.¹⁴

The plants and animals that relied on riparian zones both benefited and (in some cases) suffered from the beaver activity. The soil retained, as explained above, provided places for the plants to grow. And the plants that found a drained pond to grow in could draw on the nutrients trapped in the soil. The water retained in the soil had multiple implications for plants. First, the growing season lasted longer because sufficient water remained available to the vegetation. The water that seeped into the surrounding soils

elevated the water table so that the water was within reach of plant roots and stayed there during the exceptionally dry summer and fall months. Without the dams, the water table dropped. A pond at Summit Creek in Custer County Idaho provides a good illustration of how beaver dams affected surface water. The Intermountain Research Station has studied a beaver pond at Summit Creek for its impact on grazed areas. They found that the pond had 741 acres of surface water. One primary and several secondary dams maintained the water impoundment. This amount of water contrasted the streambed sharply with the surrounding landscape and circumstances. The area received only 10.78 inches of precipitation annually. The riparian areas along the creek where no beaver built dams were only 45 to 90 yards wide, approximately half the size of the beaver ponded area. At the pond site, three different vegetation community types developed. These include: willow (*Salix* spp.)/mesic herbaceous, mat muhly (*Muhlenbugia richardsonis*)/hummock, and mesic herbaceous species. Outside of the pond site the sagebrush (*Artemisia* spp.)/upland shrub-steppe vegetation community is the only habitat. This habitat diversity at the pond demonstrates how important beaver ponds can be for structural diversity within an ecosystem like the sagebrush steppe of southern Idaho that is dominated by one vegetation community.¹⁵

At Deer Creek in northeastern Nevada, the Intermountain Research Station staff determined that a lowered water table most likely caused a change in the vegetation that the streambank could support. Instead of willow species, currant, snowberry, rose, and other large shrubs filled the sides of the creek. Currant replacing willows due to a drop in the water table has been documented elsewhere. In return for the water they gain, the

increased number of plants growing on the streambanks checks the erosion rate in two ways. First, the velocity of the water drops as it flows through the dense willow stands. Second, the roots of all species of plants will hold onto the soil, and low-lying vegetation coverage protects soil.¹⁶

Beaver foraging and dam building influence stand composition. In 1954 a study on Hagenbarth Pond in eastern Clark County, Idaho found that over three years, at a colony with a maximum of five beaver at any one time, beaver cut an average of 269 aspens per year, for a total of 807 trees felled. Beaver felling trees opens an area for new growth.¹⁷ At Hagenbarth Pond, “Aspen reproduction in the form of root suckers two to three feet high was moderate to heavy in the older ‘clear-cut’ portions of the stands immediately north, northeast, and southeast of the pond.”¹⁸ A beaver uses about 8800 pounds of timber (with bark) per year. They cut these trees in groups, which further influences the forest composition by promoting the growth of softwood trees that need sunlight, such as firs.¹⁹

Tree growth initially declines around beaver impoundments but then, as new habitat develops, different species flourish. At Deer Creek in Nevada, Warren P. Clary and Dean E. Medin found that, “Narrow floodplains with dead and drowned aspen are common in the study area. These remnants of aspen communities were once flooded by beaver impoundments that drowned the trees.”²⁰ Flooding can be helpful to certain species, if it is part of a disturbance event and creates scoured areas such as gravel or sediment bars. Some species of willow do not successfully compete with other vegetation and will not be able to establish themselves without a recently cleared patch of land.²¹ At

Summit Creek, comparisons of photographs taken over a period of time showed a “pronounced enlargement of the willow stands since the construction of beaver dams.”²² Beaver promoted new growth in willows by selecting larger, older stems for their dams. New shoots grow from the stumps. Additionally, when beaver build their dams they may inadvertently plant willow shoots, further determining which plants will eventually grow around their ponds.²³

When trappers removed the beaver from Snake Country, they probably caused a series of events. First, untended dams eventually failed, causing some initial benefits for vegetation, such as scour, pond bottom exposure, and fewer drowned trees. Over time, however, a lowered water table, lost surface water and increased erosion resulted from the reduced number of beaver colonies. The consequences went beyond the vegetation to the animals that rely on riparian areas for water, food, and habitat.²⁴

Beaver activity in the early nineteenth century not only affected soil and water, but also benefited the animals that live in Snake Country. Vast portions of the region, even those with some tree growth fall into the semiarid category. Even water that beaver impounded would not have made any large percentage of land lush and green. Instead, streams would have supported riparian areas that beaver dams enhanced and expanded, as at Summit Creek, although the percentage of area they covered was relatively small. In the semiarid climate these riparian areas would have stood out in sharp contrast to the surroundings. To animals, the strips of vegetation along streams signaled that water, food, and habitat could be found there. In an area where annual precipitation was as low as ten inches per year, anything that improved water availability would have had a significant

impact on the ecosystem.

Ogden and Work worried that they would not find forage for their horses whenever they had to leave the streambanks for open country. In the land of sagebrush, the streambanks supported the only certain sources of edible and nutritious vegetation. For animals such as deer, elk, and antelope, the riparian areas provided sure sources of forage as they moved between summer and winter feeding areas or moved onto new range as the old one filled up or was temporarily overgrazed or browsed. Willows, grasses, sedges, and forbs grew in the riparian areas and were excellent forage. Insectivorous birds enjoyed the abundance of hatches from the pond.²⁵

The beaver-produced vegetation that animals foraged and that also acted as habitat. Structural diversity, so important in providing habitat for a wide range of species, increased as riparian areas developed. Because they were lineal in shape, the amount of edge created was maximized, thus creating enhanced habitat for species from both sides of the edge and the edge itself. Also, the diversity of vegetation types found in riparian zones established an area where the number of different types of nesting sites and feeding activities increased because the height and other characteristics of the vegetation varied substantially, especially if the riparian area was in a coniferous forest. When a pond filled in behind a beaver dam, other new habitats developed. Tree swallows and woodpeckers made their homes in drowned trees. Frogs, salamanders, and some fish took advantage of the slower, deeper water in the pond. At the outset of the fur desert policy, all of these conditions would have characterized Snake Country.²⁶

Conditions in the riparian zones also draw animals. The vegetation that grows in

the riparian areas because of this water creates a microclimate that has higher humidity, transpiration, shade, and air movement. Of the 378 terrestrial species that live in the Blue Mountains in the western portion of the fur desert, 285 need riparian areas to survive or they rely on them significantly. Some animals do not establish residence on the riparian zones but linger there for a significant amount of time. Deer will wade into the ponds to escape the mosquitoes.²⁷ A researcher in the Blue Mountains who studied elk found that, “Elk on a Blue Mountain summer range spent 40 percent of their time in riparian zones, which made up only 7 percent of the area.”²⁸

Most species, however, rely on wetlands for feeding, nesting, and breeding. Numerous studies have determined the extent to which the wetlands are used. At Douglas Creek near Mecker, Colorado, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife counted 93 species in beaver pond habitat. Outside of that area, the species diversity and bird counts declined. For the Snake River Valley in Washington, a group of researchers for the Biological Services Program reported that 50% of the bird species in the region relied on riparian vegetation for survival. At Summit Creek in Idaho, bird and small mammal populations demonstrate how important the beaver pond can be for species success. The study group live-trapped 153 small rodents at the beaver pond site. In the adjacent, non-beaver-pond habitat they trapped only 50 animals. The species diversity was the same but the pond habitat supported far more animals. The study group also counted birds. Thirteen different species lived in the beaver pond habitat, but only four were counted in the adjacent area. These four species also used the riparian area. Only two of these bird species had “high versatility ratings” which indicates they could adapt to a range of plant communities for

feeding and reproducing. All the others had low ratings. Finally, a riparian ecosystem study identified 350 species that rely on healthy riparian habitats in the region of the fur desert.²⁹

Although beaver did not create and maintain all the riparian areas in Snake Country, they played a significant role. At Summit Creek a beaver colony impounded 741 acres of surface water. At that site and elsewhere, they did what streams cannot: pond water. Riparian areas only expand outward from the streambanks if a larger volume of water is retained to support the vegetation.

When the Hudson's Bay Company and American trappers cleared the area of beaver no one recorded the consequences, but as the foregoing attests, they must have been tremendous. Figuring an average of six beaver per colony, the 35,000 taken out by the Company represents the equivalent of nearly 6,000 beaver ponds, given that some would have had bank burrows and others would have built more than one dam. The general effect would have been profound desertification across much of the region over time as beaver dams failed and were not replaced. Human activities, such as agriculture, ranching, and logging would later amplify the problem.

Time and a multitude of forces acting on and within the local communities in Snake Country obscure the consequences of the fur desert policy for the people who lived there. Unlike the physical changes that can potentially be measured and calculated in tangible, concrete terms, cultural change is hard to describe fully, let alone measure and study in any absolute sense. To further complicate matters, no one watched the native inhabitants of Snake Country to see and record how they changed in the decades

immediately following the Snake Country Expeditions. But the region's near desert conditions made water as vital to humans as to plants or animals. With the beaver largely gone, the water retention of the Snake-Columbia drainage dropped and people had to adjust to new circumstances affecting them directly or indirectly. Ironically, in light of the lack of local people's involvement with the Snake Country Expeditions, the fur desert policy appears to have pushed the Nez Perce, Cayuse, Northern Shoshone, and Bannock toward more frequent interactions with Europeans and Euro-Americans, particularly through trade.

The most direct line from the fur desert policy to local lifeways runs from the brigades to local game populations. In addition to causing habitat loss, the expeditions increased hunting pressure on game animals. In his study of the Snake Country Expedition freemen, Charles Simpson calculated their dependence on different sources of subsistence. Not surprisingly, beaver made up almost 60% of their diet. Bison hunting brought in just over 16%, and other game about 18%. Fish, berries, horses, roots, and trade with local inhabitants made up the remainder. The bison's disappearance from southern Idaho in 1841 is attributed to the combined hunting pressure by native inhabitants and Europeans (though the extreme drought followed by a severe winter in 1830-1831 could not have helped).³⁰

Further pressure on local game populations resulted from the horse herds maintained by the Nez Perce and Cayuse primarily for trade, and the Northern Shoshone-Bannock primarily for bison hunting. Shoshone on the Salmon River described the horse herds on the lower Snake and the Columbia to Lewis and Clark as being "as numerous as

the grass of the plains.”³¹ The horses competed with game animals for forage. This did not improve conditions east of what is now American Falls, Idaho, where bison herds relied on resources already depleted by the consequences of beaver removal.

An undocumented but likely consequence of the fur desert policy concerns the plants used by native people. In the drier areas especially, but across the region, a shorter growing season without retained water and more erosion would have affected food supplies. Roots played a tremendously important role in Plateau subsistence. Places like the Camas Prairie do not appear to have lessened in productivity because of their proximity to the mountains, but the overall situation must have declined.

European and Euro-Americans’ journals give some sketchy indications of conditions in Snake Country following beaver removal. Peter Skene Ogden wrote on two separate occasions in February and March of 1828 about groups of “Snakes” near the Portneuf River who apparently had some difficulty surviving the winter. In February he wrote, “Upwards of 100 Starving Snakes [most likely Northern Shoshone] in the Camp most insolent and troublesome for food.”³² Then in March he recorded, “Indians flocking around us from all quarters complaining of starvation, but we cannot assist them, we require all we have.”³³ Fifteen years later, in October 1843, John C Fremont noted the conditions of the Northern Shoshone living near where Rock Creek entered the Snake. He noted they lacked enough animal skins to make sufficient clothing for themselves, but they seemed well fed.³⁴ When Fremont arrived at Fort Boise the same month, the HBC’s Francois Payette informed him that, “every year since his arrival at this post, he had unsuccessfully endeavored to induce these people, [the local Northern Shoshone] to lay

up a store of salmon for their winter provision.”³⁵ But they hadn’t heeded his advice and, therefore, they starved every winter. These men painted a picture of the Northern Shoshone living a miserable, precarious existence without enough to eat or to clothe themselves. These conditions could be taken as evidence of the dire environmental, and thus social, consequences of the fur desert. As tempting it is to take these remarks at face value and declare the fur desert policy created severe circumstances for the local people, that would ignore the distinct possibility the traders’ own value systems colored their observations.

Elizabeth Vibert’s recently published study of fur traders’ interpretations of Plateau cultures sheds some light on the implications of using traders’ journals to reconstruct life on the Plateau in the early nineteenth century. She argues their writings essentially tell historians more about the British than the native people of the Plateau. She leaves the Snake Country Expeditions out of her study, but her conclusions apply to comments made by Peter Skene Ogden and Francois Payette about local circumstances in the 1820’s and 1840’s. Regarding the use of the word “starving,” Vibert draws on the definition that was specific to the HBC in the Plateau. Their definition implies not an actual starvation situation in which no food is available. Instead, “starving” meant the “indolent” local people had chosen not to pursue furs or the hunt, both of which could have provided them with sustenance more appropriate than salmon, which the traders disparaged. Vibert connects the traders use of the word “starving” and “indolent” with their frustration that Plateau people would not trap furs for them and the prevailing British sentiment that manhood lay in hard work, such as hunting.³⁶

Since neither any HBC traders nor any American explorers or emigrants make reference to people actually dying of starvation in Snake Country, to use these journal entries as indications of fur desert policy consequences is questionable. Even though the Snake Country Expeditions precluded the Company's use of Northern Shoshone as fur trappers, the officers had formed their opinions of Native American activities in other areas of the Plateau, where each worked prior to the Snake Country Expeditions. Those attitudes toward local subsistence patterns formed prior to entering Snake Country would most likely still be applied to the new people they met.

Even if the people in Snake Country did not starve due to the repercussions of the fur desert policy, there is evidence that environmental conditions had deteriorated. John Work's Expedition of 1830-31 felt the consequences of the fur desert policy directly. While trapping near the Salmon River, the lack of beaver required the trappers to look elsewhere for their meals. A pronounced lack of game in the area left them in temporary dire straits: "One of the men, Toupe, was obliged to kill a horse to eat, and several others will soon be obliged to do the same, being so long in the mountains and finding no beaver, the people have eaten up all their provisions."³⁷ Likewise, John C. Fremont's journal entries do not express any sense of wonder that they cannot find game, but the absence of hunted animal is conspicuous. The party killed their oxen and horses one at a time as the resources they had brought began to run low. They did not mention relying on any local game. Ogden had only resorted to killing his horses for food in dire circumstances involving substantial snows or true desert conditions in which large game had never been a reliable resource. Not once in his journals did he mention having to

resort to his pack animals for food when he was near the Snake River in the early fall, as Fremont did.³⁸ These conditions Work and Fremont experienced indicate the reduction of game animals.

A more reliable and fruitful source of information about the likely consequences of the fur desert policy for the people in Snake Country can be found in the changing economic activities of the Nez Perce, Cayuse, Northern Shoshone and Bannock. Shifts in these activities during the 1830s and 1840s may represent in part the local response to the stress the fur desert put on the environment. The adaptations varied according to the different lifeways on the continuum between gathering-fishing and gathering-bison hunting.

Arguing that the environmental consequences of the fur desert policy forced people to change their subsistence systems implies an environmental determinism that does not exist. I certainly would not claim fewer beaver led to a complete breakdown in the environment, nor in the native communities. Instead, it seems that this era, and the change in the local cultures it saw, is fertile ground for a study of how the environment does affect human communities. For example, applying optimal foraging theory to the Northern Shoshone or Nez Perce could clarify if the people shifted their activities in response to a decreased return from their local resources. In addition to the cultural influences brought by traders and missionaries, the environmental situation after the fur desert policy may have made agriculture or cattle ranching more appealing. If the environment in which they lived did not break down, did its resources for humans diminish?

Salmon fishing played a significant role in Nez Perce and Cayuse subsistence throughout the nineteenth century. The salmon that migrated as far upstream as Shoshone Falls would not have been affected by the fur desert. The Snake and Columbia and most of their tributaries would have remained well watered by the mountain snowpacks during salmon runs. But salmon only provided for approximately one-third to one-half of the food for the lower Snake and Columbia river peoples. Historians and anthropologists emphasize the continued importance of plants and local game in Nez Perce and Cayuse subsistence throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, until the reservation era began in 1855. Substantial evidence supports this continuance of the seasonal round on the Plateau. But new activities that emerged in the 1830s and 1840s also indicate that those resources may not have fulfilled the people's needs.³⁹

By 1831 the combined pelts brought in by Cayuse and Nez Perce middlemen to Fort Nez Percés made up three-quarters of the post's returns for that year. In the 1820s, according to Alvin Josephy, the Nez Perce could not be induced to trap because they saw no need for the Europeans' trade goods. The Cayuse had earlier resisted participation in the British fur trade because they saw the HBC as usurping their role as traders on the Plateau. Increased trapping led to increased trading for European goods - food, clothing, blankets, and firearms. While not reliant on these goods, some of the Nez Perce and Cayuse apparently needed or wanted them enough to begin spending far more time in pursuit of pelts than they had before the 1830s.⁴⁰

Agricultural efforts also drew some Nez Perce and Cayuse away from the seasonal rounds. The missionaries that arrived in 1837 on the Plateau encouraged the

local people to adopt a more sedentary way of life. Joel Palmer, an American traveling through the area in 1845, kept journals that reflect the missionaries success. At each camp Palmer and his group made along the Columbia, native people brought an impressive number of crops they had grown to trade with the Americans. On 12 September 1845, Cayuse and Nez Perce farmers brought “wheat, corn, potatoes, peas, pumpkins, and fish” to trade for “cloth, calico, nankins, and other clothes.”⁴¹ On 16 September, the Cayuse brought similar vegetables to trade. Further downstream near Fort Nez Perces, on 18 September, Walla Walla farmers brought potatoes and venison. Then on 21 September, some identifiable native people living near the mouth of the Umatilla River visited several times to trade food or horses for clothing. The journalists do not comment on why all of these people wanted cloth goods. Why they did not or could not use hides and furs as they had before remains unclear. Perhaps the missionaries’ influence had already encouraged some people to dress like Euro-Americans. Or, perhaps they could not find or trade for sufficient numbers of elk, deer, or bison hides to provide for their clothing.⁴²

Also in the 1840’s, Nez Perce cattle herds grew to sizable numbers. Dr. Alan Marshall has documented a Nez Perce cattle drive to the Great Salt Lake area sometime during the 1840s or 1850s. The Nez Perce accurately identified a need created in the Salt Lake area by Mormon settlers and Oregon Trail emigrants from which they could benefit. In terms of the fur desert policy, what is interesting about cattle herds and drives lies in the fact that the Nez Perce weighed their options for how to spend their time and use the land’s resources and some of them chose cattle raising. In one sense, cattle ranching fits into the pre-fur trade subsistence system. Just as the Nez Perce had raised horses for

trade, they established cattle herds. More than horses however, the cattle required that the people stay in one place. They could not let the cattle roam like they did the horses. Also, cattle raising meant much more involvement in the European and Euro-American trade network as they were the most likely trade partners.⁴³

For those Nez Perce, Cayuse, and non-mounted Northern Shoshone who stayed in their home territories and did not go after bison, life must have been lean. Little is known regarding them before the pre-Euro-American settlement era. Salmon must have become more important to the extent root and other plant resources declined.

The Nez Perce and Cayuse continued going to the Great Plains to hunt buffalo until the herds disappeared. The hunts never provided a large percentage of their subsistence. In addition to the products from the bison, a number of factors influenced the Nez Perce and Cayuse to go east of the Continental Divide. Trade goods from the Plains, markets for their horses, and the chance to establish oneself as an adult and as a brave person all drew the hunters to the Plains. This would not be surprising except that to go east meant certain confrontations with the Blackfeet. Elizabeth Vibert recognizes the difficulties posed by the Blackfeet, particularly after they acquired guns in the 1780s and 1790s, but she does not attempt to explain why the Plateau people would have continued to go to the bison hunt. According to the seasonal round described by other scholars regarding the Nez Perce and Cayuse, the bison hunt should have been unnecessary and, therefore abandoned when the risks escalated. Subsistence needs or trade good needs may be the explanation, particularly when considered in light of a parallel situation in the Northern Shoshone communities discussed below.⁴⁴

When the Salish Flathead went to the bison herds in Blackfeet territory, mornings and evenings they said the following speech: “People, remember that when we come to the buffalo Country, we are in danger of war at all times Do not let the enemy get the best of you! All young persons, post yourselves and keep watch!”⁴⁵ Into this hostile territory the horse-mounted Northern Shoshone, in what is now eastern Idaho, traveled each winter to hunt bison. Elizabeth Vibert believes that the people who went to the bison “introduced greater security and diversity into the sustenance round.”⁴⁶ In more secure and tranquil circumstances this would have been a likely scenario, but unless the Northern Shoshone could be certain they and their horse herds would survive the journey, security could hardly have been a by-product of the hunt in Blackfeet territory.

Despite the danger, however, the Northern Shoshone not only went east, they went with vigor. Every year they congregated in large groups and prepared for the hunt. The cultures mimicked that of the Plains bison-hunting communities. The eastern Northern Shoshone lived in hide tipis, rode horses, and used Plains techniques for mounted bison hunting, hunted with bows and arrows, used the products of the bison extensively and traded them. Even more convincing proof of how much Plains cultures influenced Northern Shoshone communities is the extent to which the usually highly dispersed and independent Northern Shoshone living groups joined together under temporary leaders. While the chiefs and organizational structures did not have the permanence or complexity of Plains cultures, the functions remained the same: to maintain order and increase the chances of a successful hunt.

Many scholars puzzle over the Plains characteristics of the Northern Shoshone,

Nez Perce, and Cayuse and marvel at the attacks by Blackfeet they endured. The Blackfeet had been pushed west by Euro-American settlement. An early advantage based on acquisition of the first Northern Plains traders' firearms led them to push the Northern Shoshone and Salish Flathead off the Plains in the mid-eighteenth century. None of these scholars really considers what pushed them east. It seems unlikely they went solely for the adventure the Blackfeet provided.

Considering the implications of beaver removal for the landscape, plants, and animals in Snake Country, the fur desert policy must be included in any speculation about why the Northern Shoshone went to the bison. At the Indians Claims Commission in 1952 the expert testimony included a discussion of Northern Shoshone subsistence at the time of Euro-American exploration and settlement:

The lands claimed by the Shoshone and Bannock [in Idaho] encompassed great areas of desert; the subsistence of the Shoshone and Bannock included everything edible and many items traders, settlers and most modern Americans consider inedible; their subsistence cycle kept them ever on the move to fishing areas, digging areas, hunting areas, berry picking areas, etc. Applying the Commission's criteria, it is evident that the Shoshone and Bannock needed and that they used the entire area claimed.⁴⁷

In this difficult environment something as disruptive as the fur desert policy could have had consequences substantial enough to inspire a bison hunt in the face of considerable odds against survival.

A further consequence of the fur desert policy, through the bison hunt, potentially affected all of the people living in Snake Country. Going east of the Divide meant these groups of Nez Perce, Cayuse, or Northern Shoshone would need guns and ammunition to defend themselves against well-armed Blackfeet. As guns spread, people had to acquire

them or risk being dominated by those who already had them. To a greater extent than cattle, the trade in pelts, or agriculture could ever pull native people of the Northwest into the market economy, guns ensnared them. Once guns became necessary items, so did their upkeep. All of the supplies for repairing and using guns came from the Europeans and later Euro-Americans.

This created one link in the chain that would tie the native people in the plateau to the capitalist economy and made them vulnerable to dependency on others for their subsistence. The fur desert policy certainly did not destroy the cultures of the Plateau, but it did undermine them. When they most needed to be prepared to defend themselves against outsiders, the Blackfeet and the Euro-American settlers, the influences of the fur desert ensnared them in a market that would eventually weaken them.

Notes

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Conclusion

What would inspire someone to set out to a place with roads so rough they will wear the feet off a horse? Why would someone come to the Pacific Northwest and think to clear the Snake River basin of beaver? From the first time I heard about the fur desert policy, in grade school, it has stayed in my mind as a peculiar thing to do. After researching the Expeditions for this thesis, it occurred me that however unique in details, in substance the policy belongs in a long tradition of human-nature relationships in the Northwest. Like many others Europeans and Euro-Americans the Hudson's Bay Company extracted raw materials from the land and took them elsewhere to be processed and sold. But the Native Americans living on the Columbia Plateau did not ever attempt anything like the fur desert policy. Why not? What made the British different?

The single most important fact governing the different cultural groups' actions was worldviews. The native cultures lived in a predominately subsistence economy and held a strong sense of place developed over generations of living on the Plateau. Their worldview reflected this connection to their territory. Even though each of the communities on the Plateau participated in a well-developed and far-reaching trade network, they did not exploit resources for the capitalist market economy. They depended on the local environment for the bulk of their subsistence and undermining it by trapping out the beaver would not make sense to them. The British, however, brought an entirely different lifeway to the Plateau. They lived in a capitalist market economy and viewed the

Northwest as space filled with resources, rarely sinking their roots deeper than the surface dust. These differences determined how they would view the Northwest and why the British would carry out the fur desert policy.

As they traveled along the tributaries to the Snake and Columbia rivers, most likely the traders did not ponder why and how they came to be agents of the fur desert policy. A multitude of individual circumstances landed the expedition members in Snake Country and motivated them to participate. The Company provided the unifying factor that bound the men and women into the brigades. The Company, in turn, probably did not ponder why they thought up such an idea. The context in which people live and make decisions is rarely clearly defined by them. People make decisions in response to circumstances and find perspective in hindsight. On the surface, the fur desert policy is a response to a seemingly urgent situation in which the Americans could have gained control to land and resources the Company wanted. But the motivation that fueled the fur desert policy lies not in the immediate situation in Snake Country but in the market economy in which the British existed.

As beautiful as the Northwest is, without the opportunity for financial gain, the British and Americans would not have endured the hardships of traveling there. But after Vancouver and Gray returned to their respective ports, Lewis and Clark arrived in the East, and David Thompson sent his reports back to Hudson Bay, the economic potential of the Northwest became abundantly clear. At the same time the global market economy began to blossom in the late eighteenth century, the Europeans and Americans “found” a place with harbors for ships, timber beyond imagination, fertile ground for agricultural

crops, and a jumping off point for trade with Asian countries. When they evaluated the advantages of the region, the terminology described resources, not bays, trees, and ecosystems indifferent to human economic systems. To Ogden a “fine plain” was one that he and his party could cross with ease. A good stream was one with lots of beaver.

The market economy produced this way of viewing the land. Carolyn Merchant describes the evolution of people’s ideology about the land in the New England colonies in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as a result of the “capitalist ecological revolution.” She writes in *Ecological Revolutions: Nature, Gender, and Science in New England*, “No longer merely wooed for survival, nature was mastered for wealth.”¹ Everything in nature became a potential resource in this worldview. Things lost any sense of spirituality they had possessed in the pre-market economy culture and gained identities based on their value to humans.

Carl O. Sauer called the capitalist system “suicidal.”² He believed that environmental degradation is inherent in our economic system. His pessimism may have stemmed from the Depression, during which he wrote these ideas, but his comments strike at the heart of the fur desert policy. He wrote, “the causative element [of environmental degradation] is economic, only the pathologic processes released or involved are physical.”³ It was not chance that the Northern Shoshone or Nez Perce did not ever attempt to clear all of their territories of a species for personal gain or to keep others out. Without the market economy the benefit of doing so disappears. They would have only been left without a link in their subsistence system and with possibly far-ranging environmental consequences.

But that brings up another issue for the British. Why did they not consider the environmental implications of the fur desert policy? Ecological repercussions did not figure into the decision-making as did the potential American reaction and the projected profitability of the brigades. Why is it anachronistic to look back at Peter Skene Ogden and marvel at his lack of respect for the land? The answers lie in how the British chose to determine profits and losses and success in the market economy. Environmental degradation did not figure into a early nineteenth-century capitalist's balance sheet. Carolyn Merchant describes in *Ecological Revolutions* how lumber companies in New England reduced the forest cover of that region by as much as 65% by 1850 without any sense of responsibility for the consequences. Instead, they simply moved further upstream (or further west eventually) to unlogged lands. Clogging streams with silt, polluting the air with soot, and dissolving links in the food chain remained externalities to profit and loss calculations. In a culture with an ethic that valued profit making and the accumulation of material goods, the mechanism to limit environmental degradation was economic. Only if the resource failed under the pressure or became too expensive to exploit for a profit did a businessperson have a reason to stop extracting it. In the first half of the nineteenth century the consequences of this view of the land had not yet captured anyone's attention. The whole continent lay before the merchant capitalists, seemingly awaiting their "improving" hands.⁴

This worldview came with the Hudson's Bay Company men to the Northwest. Their interest lay in the region as space containing resources for their economic gain. At first, pelts held their attention. Over time other resources grew in importance. Timber,

agricultural crops, and fish all entered the global market as commodities shipped out of Puget Sound and Columbia River ports. Trapping nearly all of the beaver out of Snake Country had a sound basis as a business tactic. The Company stood to gain the immediate profits from the pelts and the long-term benefits of decreased competition. Without the Americans trying to gain access to New Caledonia or wrest the local trade away from the Company, the supply of pelts remained more certain and controlled and the cost of the trade could be kept at a minimum. Being a monopoly has its advantages.

Elsewhere in Canada, the monopoly allowed the Company to control trapping and to maintain sustained yields. All during the nineteenth century, after they regained their position as the sole fur trading company in Canada in 1821, the Company attempted to limit trapping by their employees and Indians through a variety of strategies. In this controlled situation, beaver populations began to rebound just as the fur desert policy came to fruition. In Snake Country, the circumstances were anything but controlled, and the Company felt forced to trap aggressively and without regard for future beaver pelt yields.⁵

The Convention of 1818 only exacerbated the situation. The British knew they would eventually lose all of the territory to the south of the Columbia. Whatever ill effects the Company might have felt from the fur desert policy, the Convention made them moot. If the mountains of Idaho washed away to the ocean because of the absence of beaver, it would not have concerned the Company. Only if the resulting sediment silted up the Columbia and made it impassable for boats would their actions affect their future profitability. In a situation where all the environmental consequences would affect

native communities and Euro-American settlers, nothing prevented the Company's efforts to clear the country of beaver.

Maybe because of the Convention of 1818, but certainly in conjunction with it, the British lacked any sense of place in Snake Country. At times during the journals it seems as though the Expeditions were whirlwinds skimming across the surface, sweeping up the beaver, and dropping them at Flathead House or Fort Nez Perce. If Ogden or Work looked around the landscape, it was to appraise the locality for beaver habitat or horse forage. Their rapid pace and singular purpose prevented Snake Country from becoming a place to them; one which had value outside of resource commodities.

The brigades are an extreme example of a process that happened across the West. William Cronon wrote about a similar circumstance on a smaller scale in Kennecott, Alaska. There, copper resources drew in a mining company and its workers. The workers stayed in one place but, like the Snake Country brigades, did not develop a sense of place or permanency. The miners supplied their needs by a railroad line that ran from Kennecott to the closest port. Their economic activity had a tremendous impact on the land. And when they exhausted their resource, they left. Now Kennecott is a ghost town. According to Cronon,

Those who capitalized the town knew from the beginning that its key resource would eventually be extracted so completely as to destroy the community's *raison d'être*. They could do this because their own survival in no way depended on observing Kennecott's resources for the long run.⁶

Again, the market economy determined that the people could exploit resources and not have to accept the consequences.

The mountains of Idaho did not wash away to the ocean after the last Snake

Country Expedition. The environment did not collapse because of the trapping pressure. But the Company did not know they would not cause irreparable damage. More importantly, they did not weigh that possibility in making their plans. External circumstances, political, economic, and cultural, influenced what they would do in Snake Country more than any local consideration did. The Convention of 1818, the market economy, and the cultural value placed on wealth and material goods created a context in which the fur desert policy was not at all peculiar.

The last time I sat down in a sagebrush prairie, in the Bitterroot Valley, I smelled the sage and felt the cold wind and imagined how Peter Skene Ogden might have felt as he led his party south through the valley. I wondered what made him so different from me. The thought of clearing a species out of Snake Country repels me and brought out his determination. We are both products of the market economy and similar cultures. The only real difference I could determine lay in subtle shifts in the intellectual contexts in which we have lived. Ogden lived in one in which the market ethic and the lack of any sense of living in a place aggravated potential environmental degradation. I live in one in which a slowly developing land ethic and sense of place in the Northwest ameliorate it.

Notes

¹ Carolyn Merchant, *Ecological Revolutions: Nature, Gender, and Science in New England* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989): 149.

² Carl O. Sauer, "Theme of Plant and Animal Destruction in Economic History," *Journal of Farm Economics* XX (November 1938): 773.

³ *Ibid.*, 773.

⁴ Merchant, *Ecological Revolutions*, 224-225, 232.

⁵ Ray, "Some Conservation Strategies," 51 ff.

⁶ William Cronon, "Kennecott Journey: The Paths Out of Town," in *Under an Open Sky: Rethinking America's Western Past* eds. William Cronon, George Miles, and Jay Gitlin (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1992): 43-44.

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