


Buffalo Hunt: International Trade and the Virtual Extinction of the North American Bison[†]

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In the sixteenth century, North America contained 25 to 30 million buffalo; by the late nineteenth century fewer than 100 remained. While removing the buffalo east of the Mississippi took over 100 years, the remaining 10 to 15 million buffalo on the Great Plains were killed in a punctuated slaughter lasting little more than ten years. I employ theory, international trade statistics, and first-person accounts to argue the slaughter was initiated by a foreign-made innovation and fueled by a foreign demand for industrial leather. European demand and American policy failure are jointly responsible for the “Slaughter on the Plains.” (JEL F14, N51, N71, Q57)





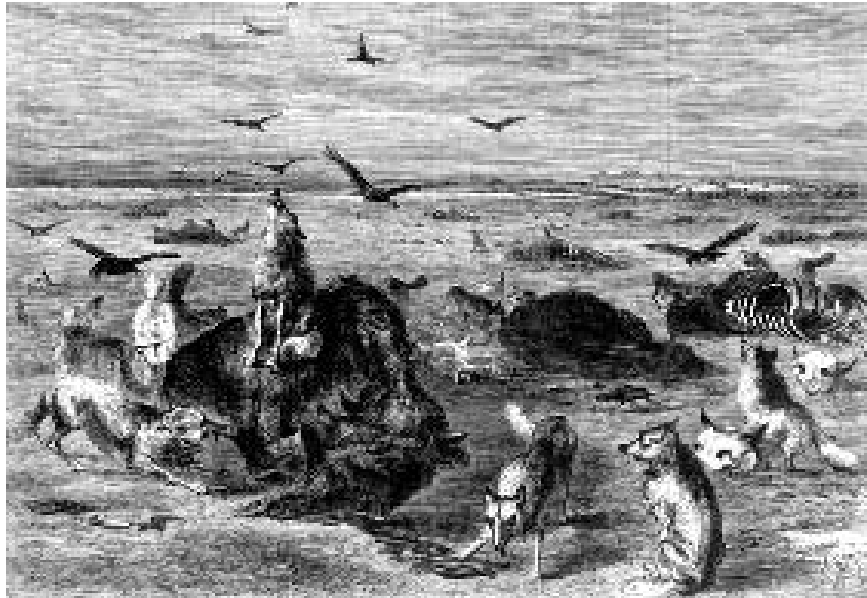


"Let them kill, skin, and sell until the buffalo is exterminated, as it is the only way to bring lasting peace and allow civilization to advance."

- General Philip Sheridan



As Americans moved west, the news was all bad for the plains bison: In 1871 a New York tannery developed a way to turn the soft hides into good leather, and soon hides brought \$3.50 each in Dodge City, Kansas. By 1874 nearly all bison—some 15 million—had been slaughtered (left). That year President Grant refused to sign a bill to curb buffalo hunting. He wanted to eliminate a major food source of the Indians he was trying to conquer.





RATH & WRIGHT'S BUFFALO HIDE YARD IN 1878, SHOWING 40,000 BUFFALO HIDES. DODGE CITY, KANSAS

FROM A PHOTOGRAPH



Original distribution of plains bison and wood bison in North America. Holocene bison (*Bison occidentalis*) is an earlier form at the origin of plains bison and wood bison.

Holocene bison

Wood bison

Plains bison (dark brown area).



Map of the extermination of the bison to 1889.
Original range above (light and dark brown areas).
Range as of 1870 (plains bison dark brown area).
Range as of 1889 (plains bison darkest brown area only).

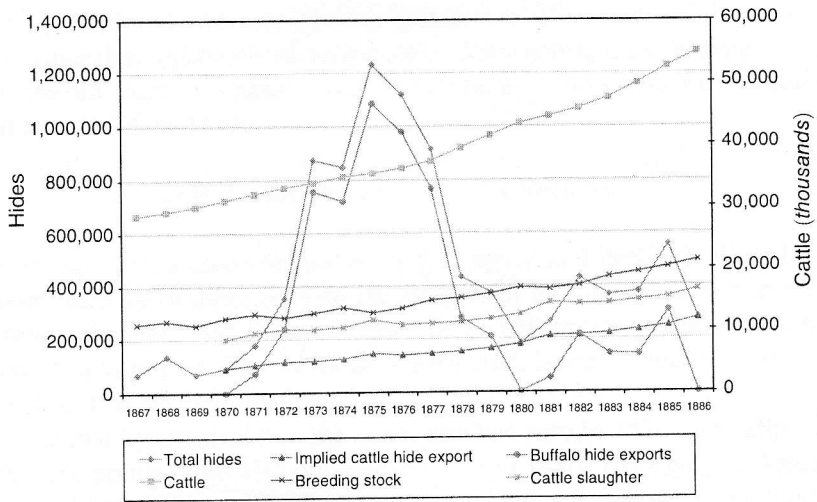


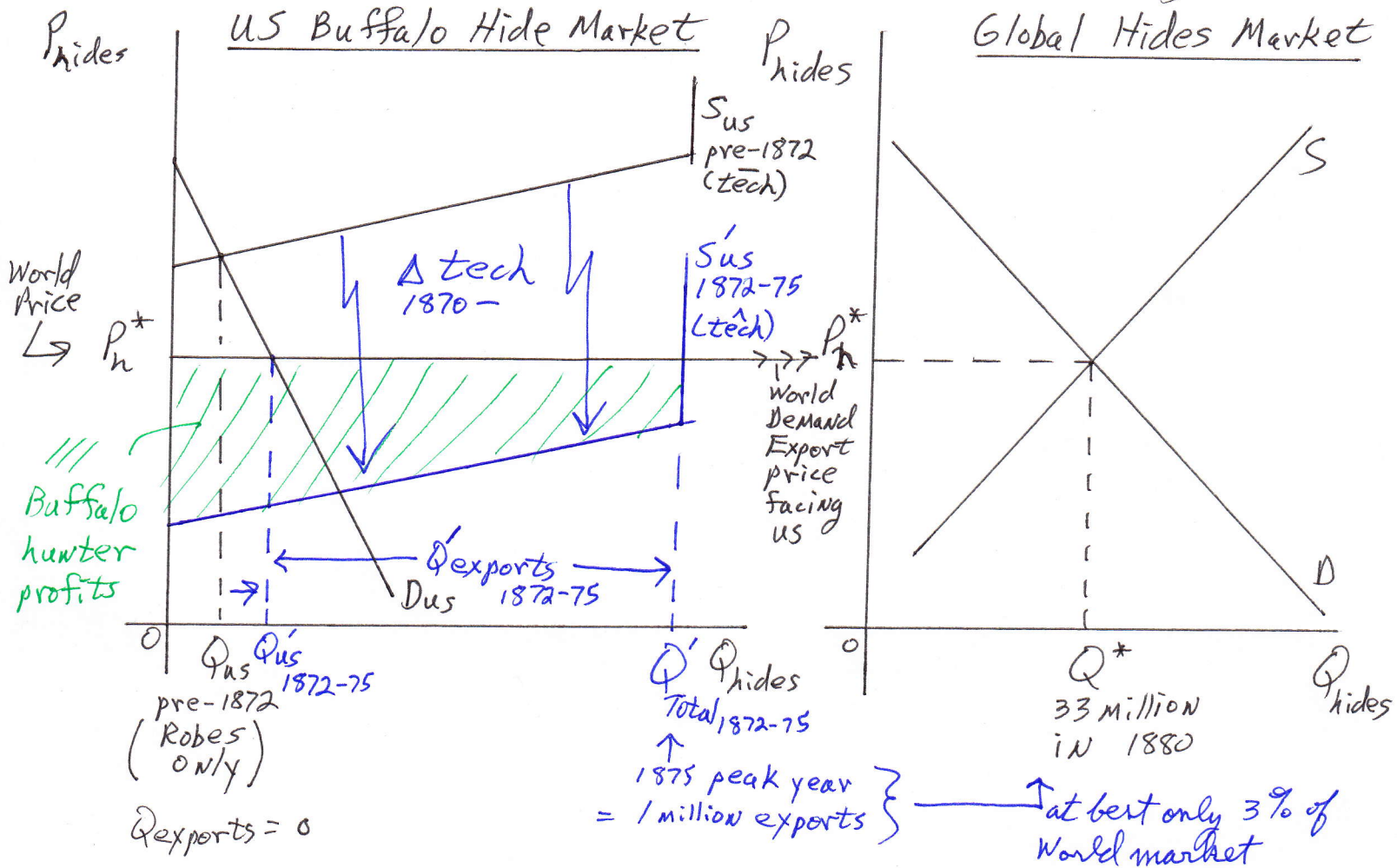
FIGURE 2. THE CONSTRUCTION OF BUFFALO HIDE EXPORTS

TABLE 1—HIDE PRICES (DOLLAR/HIDE)

Year	WP	NY	HP	Year	WP	NY	HP
1866	4.56	4.74	0	1876	3.25	4.04	2.32
1867	4.12	4.82	0	1877	3.40	3.42	2.43
1868	3.93	4.43	0	1878	2.96	3.03	2.12
1869	4.18	4.66	0	1879	3.12	4.51	2.23
1870	3.99	4.51	0	1880	3.53	3.58	2.52
1871	3.93	4.35	2.81	1881	3.40	3.42	2.43
1872	4.06	4.35	2.90	1882	3.37	3.26	2.41
1873	4.12	4.35	2.94	1883	3.34	3.34	2.38
1874	3.99	4.20	2.85	1884	3.46	3.26	2.47
1875	3.84	3.89	2.74	1885	3.28	3.58	2.34

Notes: WP is hide prices found using the Warren and Pearson price index. NY is hide prices found using data drawn from the Annual Reports of the New York Chamber of Commerce. HP is the price-to-hunters series.

International Trade Model of Buffalo Slaughter



Dynamic for the Southern Herd

