



The Creation

People and Place Before European Contact

OUR PART IN THE STORY of these mountains begins in the Pleistocene, which began about 1.8 million years ago. The Pleistocene is important to us because it was during this epoch that the assemblage of plants and animals we find in the Rockies today came into existence.

As we shall see, it is back to this period that Parks Canada's current ecosystem restoration goals have tended, as exemplified by the idea of bringing bison back into the Canadian Rocky Mountain Parks World Heritage Site. But re-wilding, as it is often called, doesn't just involve wildlife. A cultural component accompanies all re-wilding ideals.

The second thing that is important about the Pleistocene is that we see a theme emerge during that epoch that remains with us today. That theme is diminishment and loss of species and diversity.

If there was ever a place to contemplate early human presence on this continent it is the east slopes of the Rockies. Many archaeologists believe that the First Peoples travelled along the margins of the mountains on their way to permanent residence in North America. When continental glaciers reached their recent maximum, sea level was 90 metres below what it is today. Somewhere between fifty and twenty-

five thousand years ago Siberia and Alaska were joined by a wind-swept plain now known as the central Beringian Land Bridge.

It has long been thought that at this time an ice-free corridor existed between what is now the Yukon and the U.S. along the front ranges of the Rockies. It would have been right along the edge of what is now the east boundary of Banff National Park. Unfortunately, no archaeological evidence of human occupation from that early date has been discovered, but there have been important discoveries from later periods.

Lake Minnewanka in Banff National Park has long been regarded as a significant prehistoric Native occupation site. Since 1974, five Clovis projectile points have been located in the area, indicating human occupation dating back ten to twelve thousand years ago. The presence of these large points suggests that the earliest people to camp on the shores of the lake used spears to hunt large animals such as bighorn sheep and bison.

Between nine and five thousand years ago, the mountain climate warmed. Evidence suggests that the treeline in the Rockies was higher than it is today and that the people who visited the Lake Minnewanka area at that time had advanced their hunting techniques with the atlatl, a device that helped them throw spears further. It was not until 2,000 years ago that the bow and arrow appear to have come into common use among the peoples of the western plains and mountains.

There is a great deal we do not know about early Native history in the Rockies. In the spring of 1993, a team from the University of Calgary found 115 lithic objects (stone tools) indicating prehistoric occupation of an important lakeshore site. They also discovered intact stratigraphy in the lake shore sediments to suggest that the site might yield some very early material. Unfortunately, the team had only three weeks to excavate before the water backing up behind the Minnewanka hydro-power dam inundated the site.

Archaeology is important for what it has to say about the relationship of early peoples to the landscape and the possible impact their hunting activities may have had on the current wildlife assemblages in North America. Some archaeologists believe that Native peoples may have had a huge influence in determining which large mammals survived a major Pleistocene extinction to populate this continent in our time. Fossil evidence tells us that a significant number of mammals of over 45 kilograms existed near the end of the Pleistocene in North America that do not exist today. They include a number of species which, had they survived, would have resulted in a very different assemblage of animals



KTUNAXA DANCERS

At least a dozen First Nations peoples lived in and around what is now the Canadian Rocky Mountain Parks World Heritage Site for generations before the area came under protected status. For many of these peoples, traditional ways of life can only be sustained through the perpetuation of place and landscape-based ceremonies. By protecting the landscapes that are at the heart of Aboriginal culture, we keep the hope alive that one day all of humanity may one day live sustainably within nature once again.

Photograph by R.W. Sandford.

the species that disappeared are the dire wolf, *Canis dirus*, two bear species, a scimitar cat and the sabre-toothed cat. We also lost the North American lion and a cheetah.

While most of us would hardly consider such disappearances relevant in the context of our time, the ghosts of these missing predators are with us still today. Consider the pronghorn. At the end of the last Ice Age, this animal was the central prey species of the North American cheetah. While the pronghorn is still capable of the extraordinary bursts of speed that would have been necessary to escape such a fast predator as the cheetah, that predator no longer exists on the Great Plains. The cheetah is gone and the pronghorn finds itself rather in the incredulous position of the incorrigible speeder who has continually improved his vehicle so as to outrun the police, only to discover that the police no longer exist. If you live in the west you may have witnessed pronghorns trying to keep up with cars. One wonders if they miss the Pleistocene cheetah that once chased them hungrily across these same plains, or if they are simply being pursued by ghosts.²

It appears also that the two bears that disappeared in the Pleistocene were much larger than the related species of today. The short-faced bear, *Arctodus simus*, was probably nearly four metres tall when standing. This bear would have attracted considerable attention when it stood up suddenly in the willows by the river. When early North Americans confronted this bear – as surely they did – they found themselves in the presence of one of the great natural symbols of the Pleistocene; they beheld the spirit of the greatest of the great bears. Through knowledge of this animal they were able to define ceremonially just how much wild

today in both North and South America.¹ The North American bison is the largest mammal from the Pleistocene to have survived.

According to Paul Martin of the University of Arizona, six genera of large carnivores also disappeared considerably before we arrived on the scene. Five more became extinct during a period when their disappearance could have been witnessed by humans, and four others survived into the present. Among

there was in the wilderness they claimed as their home. Though smaller, today's grizzly bear continues to perform this age-old role for those who live in the West today. The moment the grizzly bear disappears we will be like the pronghorn in the absence of the cheetah. We will wander these mountains missing that element of landscape that demanded the most of us: the most courage, the most cunning and most understanding of who we are and of the powers possessed by the ecosystems upon which we depend not just for our survival but also for our identity. We, too, will be pursued by ghosts.

Perhaps the most historically significant extinctions in the Pleistocene, at least in terms of impact on the first peoples of the continent, were among the ungulates, the hoofed animals. If we wish to understand what extinction can mean to the course of history we should start with the horse. New World horses declined from twelve genera 10 million years ago to only three genera, *Equus*, *Hippidion* and *Onohippidium* in near time. As Paul Martin points out, all other horse extinctions long predate the presence of humans on the continent. The last species of *Equus* disappeared from North America some 13,000 years ago, a fact that would later influence the course of European settlement. That the Spanish possessed and controlled such remarkable animals gave them distinct advantage in early conflict with non-equestrian Aborigines, who greatly outnumbered the conquistadores in the decades after the arrival of Columbus. But once horses arrived on the continent proper from the West Indies, something remarkable happened. It was as if the niche of the native North American horse had remained vacant. The North African-bred horses were at home on this continent and Native North Americans knew exactly what to do to help them restore their lost place. Back after an absence of 13 millennia was a creature that thrived on the interior plains of the New World. It was not long before there were a million wild horses in North America.

Other Pleistocene extinctions surely must have had the same impact on associated species that the disappearance of the horse had in terms of lost opportunity to humans and gains for other grassland species that flourished in its absence. The Mountain Parks would be a very different place today had some of these species survived.

So what is the extent of our losses since the Pleistocene? Take what we have today and then add three genera of camels and llamas that existed in near time; throw in the now-extinct North American ground sloths, mammoths, mastodons, dire wolves, scimitar cats, sabretoothed cats, lions and cheetahs; add horses, tapirs and two genera of

peccaries which were larger than any pig species that exist today; add a monstrous stag moose; imagine an exotic deer called *Torontoceros* and another called *Bretzia* wandering through the pines along with a woodland musk-ox and several species of now-extinct pronghorn-like animals; add a 400-pound beaver, and you begin to get the idea that North America of the not-so-distant past resembled the Serengeti far more than it resembles our continent today. The diminishment and loss that began in the Pleistocene continue to accelerate in our time. It all began, on this continent at least, with a stroll over the Beringian land bridge, a short step that took a few hopeful people from Asia to a New World that had never before witnessed such clever animals as humans.

Unproductive controversy now surrounds the impact First Peoples may have had on the determination of which large mammals survived the Pleistocene and early Holocene to find themselves at home in what is now the Canadian West. The debate shows how little the average Canadian and most visitors know about the peoples who occupied the West before it was redefined in the contemporary European context. What is missing in our understanding of the West is an appreciation of the long presence of Native cultures before others arrived and the extent of the connection these cultures had to place and to the ecosystem dynamics upon which they depended for everything that gave their lives meaning.

THE LONG PRESENCE AND IMPACT OF ABORIGINAL PEOPLES IN THE MOUNTAIN WEST

A NUMBER OF CLEARLY DEFINED Aboriginal cultures rose and fell between the end of the Pleistocene and the arrival of the first Europeans. It has been estimated that perhaps nine million people lived in North America at the time of European contact, and there is no question these people were modifying the landscape to suit their needs and preferences. They hunted, set forests ablaze to improve habitat for game, and cultivated wild plants throughout what are now the Mountain Parks.

Many different Native peoples occupied and still live in the mountain West. The Shuswap, Ktunaxa, Salish, Stoney and Cree are still here. At different times this area was also occupied by the Gros Ventre and the Blackfoot. The Blackfoot were composed of two aligned tribes, the Siksika, a plains people, and the Peigan, who still claim the plains and foothills as their home.

Though they spent most of their time on the other side of the Continental Divide, the Salish and the Kootenay, who call themselves Ktunaxa, travelled east across a variety of mountain passes to hunt buffalo on the plains. Later they crossed the divide to exchange furs at early trading posts. The Shuswap also lived on the west side of the Great Divide. They spoke a dialect of the Salish language and travelled extensively in the Rockies as far north as Jasper. It was they who built pit houses on sites near the Vermilion Lakes in Banff National Park and on what is now the Banff Springs golf course.

The Stoney arrived in this region from the east, perhaps 300 years ago. In historical records they are also referred to as the Assiniboines. The Stoney are a Sioux-speaking people who separated from a larger group that lived in the area of the Great Lakes. They moved into the Kootenay Plains area along the North Saskatchewan River in the 1820s and settled in the Bow River Valley by 1840. They later travelled widely throughout the region now encompassed within the mountain national parks. During and following the fur trade there were Iroquois in Jasper, and since contact, Métis were everywhere.

Each tribe had their relationship to land and place, the implications of which still surface in Canada through Native land claims. But the fact remains that no one can claim the Rockies as their sole home.

The long presence of Aboriginal peoples in the Rockies belies the fact that contemporary historical interpretation of the mountain West remains Eurocentric. We often act as though nothing happened here until the train chugged into town. If we are to create a culture worthy of place we need to transcend unsupportable romantic notions and false stereotypes about Native presence in the mountain West. The first thing that must be put into proper perspective is the duration of Native presence and its relationship to notions of “European discovery.” Europeans discovered little that was not already known about the West by locals.

Another myth that needs to be dispelled is that early peoples were a passive, almost benign presence on the landscapes of the West. The First Peoples have been influencing the nature and character of the western landscape since their arrival. The landscape that we experience today passed into our hands from theirs. But before we took it from them, it passed through the hands of the fur trade.