

**“Our women and children cry for food,
and we have no food to give them”:**

The Environmental Dimensions
of Eastern Shoshone Dispossession

BY ADAM R. HODGE



In the summer of 1855, Chief Washakie and other Eastern Shoshone leaders hosted a party of Mormon missionaries led by James S. Brown at one of their villages in the Wyoming Basin. Shoshone elders listened as Brown explained how the leader of his church and colony, Brigham Young, desired to convert Shoshones to the Mormon faith and teach them how to farm. Most of the tribal elders distrusted the missionaries, but Washakie advised them that cultivating a relationship with the Mormons might be to their benefit. Shoshones had fallen on hard times, for, in Washakie's words, "this country was once covered with buffalo, elk, deer, and antelope, and we had plenty to eat, and also robes for bedding, and to make lodges. But now, since the white man has made a road across our land, and has killed off our game, we are hungry, and there is nothing left for us to eat. Our women and children cry for food, and we have no food to give them."¹

Indeed, by the mid-1850s, a combination of developments had transformed Shoshone country, much to the detriment of its indigenous inhabitants. The erosion of the region's resources began early in the nineteenth century, when the first European-American fur trappers and traders and their Indian contacts began to deplete the resources upon which Shoshones depended, particularly after the bison robe trade began to heat up during the 1830s. Then, the trickle of overland traffic through the heart of Shoshone country to the Far West that began during the 1830s swelled into a flood by midcentury. Even as the growing numbers of Anglo-American overland travelers and their livestock affected ecosystems along the trails, the travelers also killed countless wildlife for food and sport. Meanwhile, climate patterns—particularly the end of the Little Ice Age and the onset of a series of droughts during the 1840s–1860s—amplified the impact of this human activity on Shoshone lands and resources.

So, over the course of the nineteenth century, a confluence of human and environmental factors deprived the Shoshone people of vital resources and rendered them, especially their increasingly influential leader, Chief Washakie, more receptive to the idea of establishing a permanent reservation where they could farm and ranch. In fact, throughout the 1850s and 1860s, Washakie routinely informed Indian agents that his people were hungry and that he wanted a permanent reservation for them. The creation of the Wind River Reservation in 1868 and, with it, the dispossession of most of the vast stretch of Shoshone territory, was in large part made possible—and perhaps necessary—by Shoshone hunger.

Examining trappers' journals, travelers' narratives, government reports, and other historical documents alongside scientific data, particularly tree ring studies, enhances the historiography by emphasizing the oft-overlooked environmental dimensions of Indian

dispossession. Existing scholarship on nineteenth-century Eastern Shoshone history effectively dissects the human elements of the story—such as the intercultural interactions that produced treaties and reservations—but devotes too little attention to the synergistic relationship between people and the physical environment.² There are, however, notable studies of other Indian groups that highlight the utility of integrating environmental history into the narrative of Eastern Shoshone dispossession.³ Adopting this approach allows us to better understand why Washakie and other Shoshones increasingly viewed the creation of a permanent reservation as a necessary measure by the mid-nineteenth century.

THE FUR TRADE

Prior to the nineteenth century, European-Americans indirectly influenced Shoshone country. Inhabiting the remote interior of the North American West—such as the far western Great Plains, Wyoming Basin, and the northeastern corner of the Great Basin—Shoshones had little direct contact with the Spanish, English, French, and American colonizers who were active in adjacent areas prior to 1800. Yet, horses, reintroduced to the Americas during the early 1500s and thereafter diffused throughout the North American West by indigenous raiders and traders, had transformed Shoshone travel, subsistence practices, warfare, and commerce. And the great smallpox epidemic of 1780–1782 had visited Shoshone villages, killing untold hundreds if not thousands, when equestrian Indians unknowingly carried the *variola* virus through the West.⁴

But in the wake of the Lewis and Clark expedition, American and British fur trappers and traders began to visit Shoshone country. Home to many beaver, bison, and other game, such areas as the Wind, Green, Bear, and Snake River valleys offered trappers, traders, and hunters an abundance of pelts, robes, and meat. During the period of 1807–1840, European-Americans and Indians alike relentlessly harvested beaver pelts as well as bison meat and hides and, in some cases, systematically and intentionally pushed some wildlife populations toward extinction. The fur trade was, as scholars have observed, largely compatible with Indian lifeways, and it therefore did not produce immediate dispossession.⁵ Still, it is worthwhile to examine how it significantly reduced the resources found in Shoshone country and thereby affected, in the long term, Shoshone subsistence and economics.

The extent of the fur trade's impact on the environment during the first quarter of the nineteenth century cannot be known, but the historical record indicates that there was significant activity during that time. The visitations of American fur trappers began

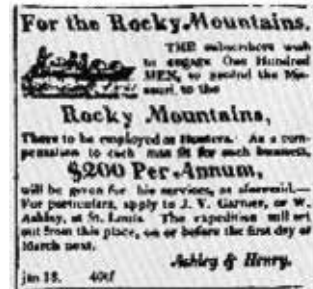
Left—When Washakie died in 1900, he had been widely considered the head of the Eastern Shoshones for a half a century. He participated in the fur trade rendezvous in the late 1820s and 1830s, and was a close friend of Jim Bridger, who encouraged him to attend the council meetings that led to the Treaty of Fort Laramie in 1851. (Image: Library of Congress)



John Colter (1774–1812 or 1813) was part of the Corps of Discovery under the command of William Clark and Meriwether Lewis, but he is perhaps best known as the first Euro-American to visit present-day Yellowstone National Park and see the Tetons in 1807 and 1808. He met with his former commander Clark in 1810 and provided substantial information on the region that Clark incorporated into his map of the West that was used by most explorers and travelers going west. (Image: *Explore Montana*)

in 1807, when John Colter, recently released from his employment as part of the Lewis and Clark expedition, explored the upper reaches of the Yellowstone and Snake River watersheds. Colter worked for Manuel Lisa, who sent other expeditions into the Rocky Mountains from his fort at the mouth of the Bighorn River to trap as well as encourage the Indians to bring in furs to trade. Lisa abandoned his post in 1808, but during the following years Colter and other trappers returned to the upper Missouri River region. In 1810, Andrew Henry established a post on the upper Snake River, which was the first American post west of the Continental Divide as well as the first in Shoshone territory.⁶ Then, in 1811, trappers and traders employed with John Jacob Astor's Pacific Fur Company visited multiple Shoshone camps during their westward overland journey to Oregon and harangued them to "procure a quantity of beaver skins for future traffic."⁷

Meanwhile, agents of the Hudson Bay Company and North West Company extended the British fur trade into Shoshone country from the north. This was quite a process, for the Blackfeet vigorously opposed the extension of the fur trade that they benefited from in the Saskatchewan River basin to their enemies beyond, including the Shoshone. But in 1818, the North West Company launched the first of a series of annual expeditions that passed through Shoshone country west of the Continental Divide. Thereafter, Shoshones who inhabited lands watered by the Snake River and its tributaries began to encounter fur-trapping brigades comprised of several dozen men who "trapped out" stretches of water and visited Native camps to trade. Those expeditions continued for another decade after the Hudson Bay Company absorbed the North West Company in 1821. The so-called Snake Country



William Henry Ashley and Andrew Henry founded the Rocky Mountain Fur Company in St. Louis in 1822. As one of the large fur trade companies competing with John Jacob Astor's American Fur Company, it played a major role in depleting the beaver population in the Rockies. (Image: *Wyoming State Historical Society*)

Expeditions exacted a heavy toll on the region's beaver populations, as the Hudson Bay Company officially reported collecting 35,000 furs during the entire course of those operations.⁸

This depletion, however, was not a product of mere economic exploitation. Aware that American fur trappers approached the Oregon country from the east, Hudson Bay Company authorities in 1823 adopted what is called the "fur desert policy." As George Simpson, the director of the Northern Department which implemented the policy, wrote, "[i]f properly managed no question exists that it [the Snake River region] 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 it as fast as possible."⁹ So, in an effort to protect the British Empire's interests in the Pacific Northwest by limiting American intrusions into the Oregon country, Hudson Bay Company brigades endeavored to exterminate every beaver in the region, and they encouraged Shoshones and other Indians to help them do so. Peter Skene Ogden's 1824–1830 Snake Country Expeditions executed this policy so effectively that the final brigades of 1830–1831 and 1831–1832 found few beaver left to trap.¹⁰

Even as Hudson Bay Company trappers created their "fur desert," company officials' concerns about encroaching American trappers became a reality. In 1824, trappers and traders employed by William H. Ashley, who inaugurated the age of the Rocky Mountain trapping system in the heart of Shoshone country, ranged from the upper Missouri to the Snake River, working extensively in the watersheds of the Bear, Green, and Wind Rivers. This system revolved around the annual rendezvous, which was based on the precedent of the Shoshone trade fair. Each summer, after trapping through the winter and spring months, fur company employees, independent trappers, and Indians gathered at a location designated during the previous year's meeting to exchange their furs for goods that arrived by wagon from St. Louis. Every rendezvous held between 1825 and 1840 occurred in Shoshone country, in what is now western Wyoming, southeastern

Idaho, or northern Utah. The Rocky Mountain trapping system lasted until 1840, at which point the depletion of beaver populations made that summer's rendezvous the last of its kind.¹¹

Shoshones played major roles in the Rocky Mountain trapping system. Those who lived in the Wyoming Basin had previously had little contact with traders, and since they were beleaguered by Blackfoot warriors and other enemies who had long reaped the benefits of such commerce, many eagerly established friendly relations with the Americans and engaged in the fur trade. Their annual trade fair and the rendezvous transpired concurrently, providing Shoshones and their indigenous allies with direct access to vital commercial and social activities. Many Anglo-American trappers traveled with and lived in Shoshone villages, and some Shoshone women married trappers, thereby forging valuable economic connections as well as providing trappers with protection from other Indians. Shoshone men, who had previously hunted few beaver, integrated trapping for commercial purposes into their daily lives by devoting some of their time during the winter and spring months to trapping. Shoshones had much incentive to participate in the fur trade to begin with, since they desired guns, ammunition, and other goods, but competition between the Rocky Mountain Fur Company and the American Fur Company intensified after the inception of the latter in 1828 as those outfits fought for the loyalty of Shoshones and other natives, thereby driving up the prices they paid for furs.¹²

It did not take long for European-American and Indian trappers to deplete the Shoshone country's beaver populations. While reporting on his 1839 journey through the Wyoming Basin and Snake River country, German visitor F.A. Wislizenus remarked that "[h]undreds of [beaver] have been trapped here in the last decades, and

Beaver pelts were a valuable part of the fur trade between Euro-Americans and native tribes; when Americans arrived in the West, the land was still teeming with beavers. This image was created by John James Audubon, who is most famous for his *The Birds of North America*; this is from his less-known *Viviparous Quadrupeds of North America*, released in 1849. (Image: John James Audubon, *Viviparous Quadrupeds of North America*, 1854)



a war of extermination has been waged against the race.” That statement was especially true regarding the Snake River region, as the Hudson Bay Company's “fur desert policy” had been so ruthlessly executed from 1824 to 1830 that the company discontinued its annual brigade expeditions after that of 1831–1832. But further east, where the American fur outfits and their Indian contacts, including Shoshones, did not endeavor to wipe out beaver populations, the result was nevertheless much the same. In 1843, writer Matthew C. Field met Shoshones east of the Continental Divide and remarked that “the trappers have so thinned their country of beaver that they are now in an impoverished condition.”¹³ So, by participating in the fur trade, Shoshones had briefly enhanced their material wealth and military power by acquiring firearms and other trade goods, but they ultimately contributed to the beaver's demise and, with it, the collapse of the Rocky Mountain trapping system.¹⁴

The fur trade also affected Shoshone subsistence for the worse. Although European-American fur trappers and their Indian contacts largely focused on harvesting beaver pelts, other wildlife populations also suffered. European-Americans killed some big game themselves, but Shoshones and other Indians killed many of the bison, elk, and other animals to provide the many trappers who visited the Rockies during the 1820s and 1830s with hides, fresh meat, and pemmican. Bison were numerous in the Portneuf River area when Shoshones began trading at Fort Hall in 1834, but Field observed in 1843 that the game “in the Snake country ha[s] been thinned off and nearly killed up by the hunting of the whites.”¹⁵ That same year, American explorer John C. Frémont noted that bison could once be found in the Green and Bear River valleys, “but so rapidly have they disappeared within a few years that now, as we journeyed along, an occasional buffalo skull and a few wild antelope were all that remained of the abundance which had covered the country with animal life.” Indians and fur trappers alike had, in his words, “slaughter[ed] them with a thoughtless and abominable extravagance” to sustain themselves and to trade surplus meat and hides.¹⁶ And like that of the beaver, a mere shadow of a once considerable population remained when the zenith of the fur trade had passed.

In response to this destruction in the Snake, Bear, and Green River areas, Shoshones began to establish a stronger presence in lands east of the Continental Divide that remained rich in game. Although visiting such places as the Wind River valley and Bighorn Basin carried great risk because their Blackfoot and (sometime) Crow enemies frequented those areas, Shoshones were drawn to their abundance. Fur trader Edwin Thompson Denig reported in his manuscript composed during the mid-1850s that this region was “perhaps the best game country of the world,” as bison, elk, pronghorn, and other game species were numerous.¹⁷ It was therefore little surprise that Washakie and other Shoshones claimed the Wind River country as part of their homeland when reservation talks began after midcentury.

OVERLAND TRAVELERS AND SETTLERS

Before the final Rocky Mountain fur-trade rendezvous occurred in 1840, the next great wave of change began to sweep through Shoshone country. During the 1830s, Americans began migrating along the famed Oregon Trail and other routes to the Far West. Since Shoshone country offered one of the most convenient routes through the Rocky Mountains—South Pass—a trickle of American emigrants trekked through such areas as the southern Wyoming Basin and the Snake River Plain. Following routes established by Indians as well as European-American fur trappers and traders, their travels portended an eventual tidal wave of emigrants that devastated the Shoshone world and compelled them to seek refuge on reservations. Meanwhile, the founding of the first major non-Indian settlements in Shoshone country further altered ecosystems and reduced Shoshone territory, thereby contributing to Shoshone dispossession.

Although overland travel through Shoshone country was relatively light during the 1830s and most of the 1840s, the emigrants nevertheless affected the land and its inhabitants. Perhaps the greatest stimulus of travel to the Far West prior to the late 1840s was the missionary impulse that drew hundreds of Christian missionaries to the Oregon country, although some also ventured westward to find adventure, riches, better health, or to escape some trouble in the East. Shoshone territory was an important part of their journey westward, for, in addition to the vital South Pass, emigrants resupplied and rested at Fort Bridger in the Green River country and/or Fort Hall on the Portneuf River while depending upon the Sweetwater, Green, Bear, Snake, and their tributaries for freshwater during their passage through that arid region. By the early 1840s, their travel was leaving an impression on the landscape, for in 1843 Frémont, upon picking up the trail along the Sweetwater, remarked that “the numerous heavy wagons of the emigrants had entirely beaten and crushed the *Artemisia* [the genus of plants that includes sagebrush].”¹⁸

As the 1840s drew to a close, the slow but steady stream of travelers through Shoshone territory swelled into a flood. This was in large part due to the discovery of gold in California, which drew thousands of “forty-niners” westward, although the Mormon emigration to Utah contributed to the flow of traffic. Between 1840 and 1848, some 18,850 Americans traveled west through South Pass, but the period of 1849–1860 saw approximately 277,400 emigrants make that journey through Shoshone country. When the original trails became overburdened with emigrant trains that depleted grass and timber resources, enterprising individuals blazed new “cut-offs” that exposed more of the land to the travelers’ destruction. In 1857, for example, Frederick W. Lander surveyed the first federally funded road project located west of the Mississippi River, a trail that ran north of the main Oregon

Trail “through a pass used by the Shoshonee [*sic*] tribe of Indians, in returning from the ‘buffalo’ during the winter season.” In its first year of operation, more than 10,000 travelers used the Lander Cut-off.¹⁹

This traffic through Shoshone country detrimentally affected the physical environment. By the early 1850s, travelers killed or drove off most of the game that had once frequented trail areas. The fur trade had already reduced the bison and other game populations that inhabited the river valleys and plains west of the Continental Divide, but the era of overland travel completed their destruction as emigrants killed wildlife for food or sport. Meanwhile, their livestock overgrazed areas that were once rich in forage; overland travelers could consequently count on finding very little game along the trails by the 1850s. As Granville Stuart noted in 1858 while preparing to trek from southwestern Montana to Fort Bridger, “[w]e knew that as soon as we crossed the Rocky mountain divide into the sagebrush plains of the Snake river, there would be no game of any kind and also none from there to Fort Bridger.”²⁰ Similar conditions prevailed further east, for in 1843 Matthew Field noted that his party “[t]ravelled from 7 a.m. till 6 p.m. today without stopping, for want of water, through this ‘*South Pass*’ seeing no game, and tramping through sage brushes all day.”²¹ Riverine areas were also devastated, for many travelers visited the same stretches of waterways to gather wood and water, and the wagon trains and livestock that forded streams and rivers eroded river banks while kicking up untold tons of sediment that the waterways then carried far downstream.²²

Shoshones suffered as overland travel affected ecosystems for the worse. The first Utah Superintendency of Indian Affairs report, produced in 1850, observed that game was scarce in Shoshone country and that those Natives therefore needed government relief. Four years later, another report documented Washakie’s blunt statement that “my people are starving.” Shoshones compensated for the depletion of game in their homelands by relying more on women’s foraging efforts and by traveling to the western Great Plains to hunt bison each fall. However, such activities apparently failed to provide adequate sustenance. When, in the mid-1850s, the United States government began helping the Mormons (who ran the Utah Indian Agency until the early 1860s) support the Shoshone, Washakie lamented that the agents frequently gave his people blankets when they really needed food.²³

The arrival of the first permanent settlers in Shoshone country exacerbated matters. Thwarted in their attempts to establish a series of colonies further east because many Americans did not approve of their doctrine and practices, Mormons turned their attention to “unsettled” tracts of land in the West during the 1840s, particularly Utah. In 1847, Shoshones first encountered Mormons entering their country and, of the nearly 300,000 Americans who traveled westward through South Pass between 1840 and 1860, some 43,000 of those ended their journey in Utah or Wyoming. The Mormon colony in Utah grew rapidly, as about 4,600 had settled in the Great Salt Lake area by the end of 1848. Within a few years, their settlements

sprawled northward into the Bear River area, east into the corridor between the Salt Lake and Fort Bridger, and into the Green River valley.²⁴

The Mormon colonization of northern Utah and southwestern Wyoming further taxed the resources upon which Shoshones depended. The growth of settlements deprived Shoshones of lands and resources by reducing their access to key grazing and hunting areas. Consequently, almost as soon as Brigham Young began managing Indian affairs in Shoshone country in 1850, he heard Washakie's concerns about emigrants depleting resources and settlers taking Shoshone lands. Young, in turn, called for the federal government to create Indian reservations and provide the natives with instruction in farming even as Mormon missionaries worked to "civilize" the Shoshone and other Indians through religious conversion. Meanwhile, Mormons pioneered cattle ranching in southwestern Wyoming, as their colony at Camp Supply near Fort Bridger had a cattle herd by 1853. By the late 1850s, wildlife as well as Shoshone horses lost access to more forage as additional cattle herds had been established in the Bear River, Black's Fork, and Ham's Fork areas.²⁵

The invasion of Shoshone lands and the depletion of the resources they depended upon precipitated conflict that, in turn, produced their dispossession. During the late 1850s and early 1860s, Shoshone raids on wagon trains and settlements intensified as conditions in Shoshone country deteriorated. The opening of mining areas such as the Comstock Lode in Nevada and Virginia City in Montana drew additional travelers through Shoshone lands and led to the founding of new trails, both of which added pressure to the region's already diminished resources. An Indian agent based at Fort Bridger in 1862 reported that the Shoshones in the area were "in a destitute condition," for there was "very little game in this territory," and while Washakie lamented how emigrants and settlers affected his people's land, he maintained that war was not the answer. However, he was in the minority, as other Shoshone leaders, such as Pocatello, reportedly called Washakie an "old woman" because he refused to fight. Pocatello and other Shoshone chiefs led raids on settlements as well as on travelers along the trails to California, Oregon, and Montana, taking lives and property, including livestock that helped to alleviate their hunger. Their armed resistance culminated in a combined Shoshone-Bannock assault in 1862 that struck emigrants scattered along the trail from the North Platte to the Bear River.²⁶

This warfare, which was at least in part an expression of Shoshone hunger, culminated in the Bear River Massacre. In the wake of the 1862 Shoshone-Bannock raids, Colonel Patrick Connor led a detachment of California volunteers in an attack on a Shoshone Camp situated along the Bear River on January 29, 1863. What began as a battle quickly became a route as the Indians ran out of ammunition. By the time the fight ended, the toll included over 200 Shoshones killed, 160 women and children taken captive, 175 horses captured, and 70 lodges destroyed. At the camp, soldiers found items taken during

raids on American settlements and emigrant trains, but that hardly justified the harsh treatment of Shoshone women and children after the "battle" ended; the soldiers reportedly raped multiple women and brutally killed infants.²⁷

TOWARD A RESERVATION

In the aftermath of the Bear River Massacre, the push to create a reservation for the Shoshone began in earnest. For nearly a decade, Washakie as well as some government officials had expressed interest in setting aside a permanent reservation for the Shoshone, but it was the brutal Bear River Massacre, a product of the ongoing deterioration of Shoshone country's resources and the related raiding of the late 1850s and early 1860s, that drove home the need for a Shoshone reservation. Yet, even as representatives of the United States government and the Shoshone people began to hold meetings to discuss such a reserve, further developments exacerbated the detrimental environmental effects of the fur trade and overland travel.

The emergence and growth of commercial bison hunting also contributed to Shoshone dispossession. Bison were once a peripheral source of skins for the market (although invaluable locally as food and attire for trappers and traders), for their bulky hides were hardly worth transporting over long distances overland. However, as beaver supplies diminished and Americans used improved methods of transportation in the West (such as the steamboat), bison hides became a viable commodity for exportation to eastern markets. Natives—including Shoshones—were integral to this commerce, for the American fur outfits acquired most bison robes from Indian hunters. During the period of 1833 to 1843, the American Fur Company alone reportedly dealt some seventy thousand robes annually. Much of the early activity was centralized along the Missouri itself, but by the 1850s Indians more intensively exploited the bison herds found in such areas as the Wyoming Basin. Shoshones played a significant role in this destruction of the bison herds, as evidenced by an 1866 report of the Indian agent at Fort Bridger, which observed that Shoshones brought about a thousand robes to trade after their recent fall and winter hunts.²⁸

Changing climate conditions paralleled this human activity. The onset of the Little Ice Age in the 1300s had brought greater annual precipitation and lower temperatures to the Great Plains and Rocky Mountains, which enhanced forage growth, much to the benefit of bison, other large game, and the Indians who hunted those animals. The Little Ice Age came to an end in the mid-1800s as warmer temperatures and decreased rainfall prevailed across much of North America. Historical drought severity indices based on tree-ring studies reveal that the area encompassing southwestern Wyoming, northern Utah, and southeastern Idaho emerged from a seven-year stretch of relatively wet conditions in 1840, with the period of 1842–1848 constituting the driest timespan since the 1820s. Between 1842 and 1872, the



A striking feature of the upper Plains was the herds of bison. This scene by Swiss-born painter Karl Bodmer places a herd into a western landscape. For Bodmer and the German ethnographer Prince Maximilian of Wied who hired him, the landscape and the fauna living in it were a source of endless fascination. Bodmer's Port-Folio of more than 80 images was released in 1841. (*Image: Reuben Gold Thwaites, Early Western Travels, 1748-1846*)

region experienced nineteen dry years and twelve wet years, in contrast to the period 1806–1841, which featured twenty wet years, thirteen dry years, and four in which the region was divided into parts that experienced different conditions.²⁹

Those who visited Shoshone country during the mid-1800s occasionally commented on the environmental conditions that made food scarce. When Frémont, for example, trekked through the southern Wyoming Basin in 1842, he noted that “the present year has been one of unparalleled drought, and throughout the country the water had been almost dried up.” He discussed the drought’s impact on the region’s forage supplies, writing, “I was

informed that the roving villages of Indians and travelers had never met with difficulty in finding an abundance of grass for their horses; now it was after great search that we were able to find a scanty patch of grass.” He learned from some Lakotas that drought and grasshoppers had combined to destroy forage and drive bison out of the general area, remarking that “[t]his was bad news. No grass, no buffalo—food for neither horse nor man.” Droughts also occurred in 1851–1852, 1855–1857, and 1861–1865.³⁰

Following in the wake of a long period of climate conditions that had supported an abundance of flora and fauna upon which Indians subsisted, the trends of the mid-1800s contributed to Shoshone hunger, thereby hastening

Shoshone dispossession. Washakie and other Shoshones came around to the idea of a reservation during the 1850s, as did various government officials. Repeatedly during the 1850s, Washakie informed government agents that he wanted a reservation for his people where they would be protected from Americans and other Indians alike as they learned how to farm and hunt while continuing to hunt. An 1862 report of the Indian agent at Fort Bridger that noted the lack of game in Shoshone country went on to identify the Wind River valley as a candidate for the site of a Shoshone reservation. He contended that creating a reservation there would remove Shoshones from existing trail and settlement areas while securing them with a homeland that had agricultural potential.³¹

But progress toward a reservation was slow prior to the Bear River Massacre. Shoshones had been invited to the 1851 council at Fort Laramie, but only as guests, not participants, since government officials did not think they could claim lands east of the Continental Divide. So, as Washakie awaited his turn to speak (which never came), government agents divided up the western Plains and much of the Wyoming Basin among other Indian groups. After the meeting, Washakie expressed his displeasure at being unable to voice his concerns about the effects of American emigrants and settlers on Shoshone lands. He was also frustrated that the government officials did not consult him before determining that the Wind River valley belonged to Crows.³²

It was only after the Shoshone-Bannock raids of 1862 and the subsequent Bear River Massacre that the United States government concluded a treaty with the Shoshone

in which it recognized their territorial claims. On July 2, 1863, Washakie and other Shoshone chiefs signed the first Fort Bridger Treaty, in which they promised not to trouble overland travelers and agreed to allow the construction of railroads and telegraph lines through their lands. Government officials agreed to give Shoshones annuities as compensation for the depletion of resources in their homelands. The treaty also identified a large Shoshone territory comprised of some 44,672,000 acres in the Intermountain West, which included land in southeastern Idaho, northern Utah, northwestern Colorado, and western and southern Wyoming. This left the Shoshone with a vast “reservation” that included existing overland trails and settlements within its boundaries, but few lands that remained rich in game. In effect, the treaty defined Shoshone territory for the purposes of Indian management while making no effort to protect it or ensure that the Shoshone had access to quality hunting grounds. Washakie recognized as much, for he expressed disappointment that the 1863 Fort Bridger Treaty did not create a permanent reservation for his people and that the Wind River valley was not included within the Shoshone “reservation.”³³

In 1868, Shoshone leaders again met with government officials to negotiate treaties. The discovery of gold at South Pass and the construction of the Union Pacific railroad through the southern portion of the newly formed Wyoming Territory led the federal government to confine the Shoshone to a smaller, more isolated reservation. One of the results of the second Fort Bridger Treaty, signed on July 3, 1868, was the creation of the 3,054,182-acre Wind River Reservation in the Wyoming Territory. Although the

Astoria, at the mouth of the Columbia River, was a primary base of operations in the Pacific Northwest for John Jacob Astor’s Pacific Fur Company (which was part of the American Fur Company). It was part of Astor’s plan to organize a fur trade operation that would have global economic implications. After the War of 1812 ended, Astoria was increasingly in competition with the British North West Company. (*Image: Library of Congress*)



treaty also reserved the right of the Shoshone to hunt in adjacent unoccupied lands, the government agents warned Washakie and others that “[i]n a few years the game will become scarce and you will not find sufficient to support your people. You will then have to live in some other way than by hunting and fishing.” The document therefore also included various “civilizing” provisions, such as for the eventual parceling out of farmlands and the construction of schools and other buildings.³⁴

Washakie lauded the 1868 Fort Bridger Treaty, especially the creation of the Wind River Reservation. After the meeting concluded, he reportedly said:

I am laughing because I am happy. Because my heart is good. As I said two days ago, I like the country you mentioned, then, for us, the Wind River valley. . . . When we want to grow something to eat and hunt I want the Wind River Country. . . . We may not for one, two or three years be able to till the ground. The Sioux may trouble us. But when the Sioux are taken care of, we can do well. Will the whites be allowed to build houses on our reservation? I do not object to traders coming among us, and care nothing about the miners and mining company where they are getting out gold. I may bye and bye get Some of that myself. I want for my home the valley of Wind River and lands on its tributaries as far east as the Popo-Agie, and I want the privilege of going over the mountains to hunt were [sic] I please.³⁵

Although Washakie voiced some concerns about the future, particularly regarding the extent of American encroachment on the new reservation and the looming Lakota threat to his people, he was pleased to have the Wind River reservation as a home. And, after years of informing Indian agents that his people were hungry,

Washakie, for the moment at least, was optimistic that the Shoshone would do well at the Wind River Reservation.

Over the course of the nineteenth century, a confluence of human and environmental developments transformed Shoshone country, much to the detriment of the region’s indigenous inhabitants. By eroding the resources upon which Shoshones depended and leaving them hungry, the events of the 1800s contributed to the dispossession of the Eastern Shoshone. The American Rocky Mountain trapping system and the execution of the Hudson Bay Company’s “fur desert policy” enmeshed Shoshones in a global market economy while depleting the very resources upon which that economy depended. Meanwhile, game populations that were then peripheral to the beaver pelt trade—such as the bison—declined because of their utility as local supplies of food and clothing. Then, the rush of overland travel to the Far West that began by midcentury as well as the growth of non-Native settlements further eroded the resources that Shoshones needed. This was compounded by the end of the Little Ice Age and the onset of generally warmer, drier climate conditions as well as a series of droughts. The growth of commercial bison hunting further exacerbated matters.

This intersection of human activity and environmental change left the Eastern Shoshone hungry. Washakie therefore wanted a permanent reservation for his people, a land set aside for them that would be protected and where they could continue to hunt, fish, and forage. One might question Washakie’s sincerity when he stated his willingness to take up farming, but a reservation would provide for that possibility. And the resource-rich Wind River Reservation held much promise as a refuge from the hardship and hunger that the Eastern Shoshone had endured throughout the mid-1800s.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ James S. Brown, quoted in Virginia Cole Trenholm and Maurine S. Carley, *The Shoshonis: Sentinels of the Rockies* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1964), 154.
- ² The seminal work on the creation and early development of the Wind River Reservation is Henry E. Stamm IV, *People of the Wind River: The Eastern Shoshones, 1825–1900* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999).
- ³ For example, see Richard White, *The Roots of Dependency: Subsistence, Environment, and Social Change among the Choctaws, Pawnees, and Navajos* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983); Pekka Hämäläinen, *The Comanche Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).
- ⁴ For the horse revolution in the North American West, see Colin G. Calloway, *One Vast Winter Count: The Native American West before Lewis and Clark* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), chapter 6. For the smallpox epidemic of 1780–1782 in the North American West, see *ibid.*, 415–26.
- ⁵ For example, see J.R. Miller, *Skyscrapers Hide the Heavens: A History of Indian-White Relations in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989).
- ⁶ Hiram Martin Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West*, vol. 1 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press), 114–23, 138–44.
- ⁷ Washington Irving, *Astoria, or, Anecdotes of an Enterprise beyond the Rocky Mountains*, edited by Richard Dilworth Rust (Boston: Twayne, 1836), 186, 196, 206, 216, 222.
- ⁸ Jennifer Ott, “‘Ruining’ the Rivers in the Snake Country: The Hudson’s Bay Company’s Fur Desert Policy,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 104, no. 2 (2003): 166–95, 167–68; Harrison Clifford Dale, ed., *The Explorations of William H. Ashley and Jedediah Smith, 1822–1829* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991), 42–48, 153.
- ⁹ Governor and Committee, London, to John D. Cameron, July 22, 1824, in George Simpson, *Fur Trade and Empire: George Simpson’s Journal*, edited by Frederick Merk (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), 242.
- ¹⁰ Ott, “‘Ruining’ the Rivers,” 166–79.
- ¹¹ Dale, *Explorations of William H. Ashley and Jedediah Smith*, 38–39, 88–89, 151; David J. Wishart, *The Fur Trade of the American West, 1807–1840: A Geographical Synthesis* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979), 121–27, 190–93.
- ¹² Stamm IV, *People of the Wind River*, 19–20; Demitri B. Shimkin, “Wind River Shoshone Ethnogeography,” *University of California Anthropological Records* 5, no. 4 (1947), 245–88, 268–70; Wishart, *Fur Trade of the American West*, 132–52; Chittenden, *American Fur Trade*, vol. 1, 4–5, 41–42, 151–53, 291–306, 329–62.
- ¹³ F.A. Wislizenus, *A Journey to the Rocky Mountains in the Year 1839* (St. Louis: Missouri Historical Society, 1912), 121; Matthew C. Field, *Mountain and Prairie Sketches*, edited by Kate L. Gregg and John Francis McDermott (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1957), 141.
- ¹⁴ Beavers have notoriously low rates of reproduction, a fact that contributed to their rapid decline. After the heyday of the Rocky Mountain trapping system, though, beaver populations gradually rebounded in many areas that had once been “trapped out.” Wishart, *Fur Trade of the American West*, 31–33, 212–13.
- ¹⁵ Field, *Mountain and Prairie Sketches*, 141; Irving, *Adventures of Captain Bonneville*, 153–54, 235–36, 253–54.
- ¹⁶ John C. Frémont, *Frémont’s First Impressions: The Original Report of His Exploring Expeditions of 1842–1844*, edited by Anne F. Hyde (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012), 155–58.
- ¹⁷ Edwin Thompson Denig, *Five Indian Tribes of the Upper Missouri*, edited by John C. Ewers (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1961), 139.
- ¹⁸ Frémont, *Frémont’s First Impressions*, 134; John D. Unruh, Jr., *The Plains Across: The Overland Emigrants and the Trans-Mississippi West, 1840–1860* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 44–45, 91–94.
- ¹⁹ F.W. Lander, “Practicability of Railroads through the South Pass,” in *News of the Plains and Rockies, 1803–1865: Original Narratives of Overland Travel and Adventure Selected from the Wagner-Camp and Becker Bibliography of Western Americana*, vol. 6, edited by David A. White, 213–333 (Spokane: Arthur H. Clark, 1996), 329; Unruh, *Plains Across*, 94–98, 119–20.
- ²⁰ Granville Stuart, *Forty Years on the Frontier*, edited by Paul C. Phillips (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), part I, 130.
- ²¹ Field, *Mountain and Prairie Sketches*, 133.
- ²² Elliott West, *The Way to the West: Essays on the Central Plains* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995), 26, 30, 98.
- ²³ Washakie, quoted in G.A. Wright, *People of the High Country: Jackson Hole before the Settlers* (New York: Peter Lang, 1984), 146; Robert F. Murphy and Yolanda Murphy, “Shoshone-Bannock Subsistence and Society,” *Anthropological Records* 16, no. 7 (1960), 293–338, 306–9; Stamm, *People of the Wind River*, 20, 30, 34.
- ²⁴ Unruh, *Plains Across*, 18–19, 119–20; Trenholm and Carley, *Shoshonis*, 108–10.
- ²⁵ Trenholm and Carley, *Shoshonis*, 116, 131–34, 144, 147–53, 157; T.A. Larson, *History of Wyoming*, 2nd ed., rev. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1978), 164.
- ²⁶ 1862 Letter to the Superintendent of Indian Affairs, Box 60, Folder 3, Grace Raymond Hebard Papers, 1829–1947, Collection Number 400008, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming; Trenholm and Carley, *Shoshonis*, 156, 165–68, 176, 178; Murphy and Murphy, “Shoshone-Bannock Subsistence and Society,” 305.

- 323–25; Stamm, *People of the Wind River*, 27–28.
- ²⁷ Brigham D. Madsen, *The Northern Shoshoni* (Caldwell, Idaho: Caxton, 2000), 33–36; Trenholm and Carley, *Shoshonis*, 180–197.
- ²⁸ 1866 Letter to the Superintendent of Indian Affairs, Box 60, Folder 3, Grace Raymond Hebard Papers, 1829–1947, Collection Number 400008, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming; Wishart, *Fur Trade of the American West*, 66; Preston Holder, *The Hoe and the Horse on the Plains: A Study of Cultural Development among North American Indians* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1970), 113.
- ²⁹ Brian M. Fagan, *The Little Ice Age: How Climate Made History, 1300–1850* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 49–50, chapter 12; E.C. Pielou, *After the Ice Age: The Return of Life to Glaciated North America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 15, 308, 310; Paul J. Krusik and Edward R. Cook, “North American Drought Atlas: A History of Meteorological Drought Reconstruction from 835 Tree-Ring Chronologies for the past 2005 Years,” Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory and the National Science Foundation, <http://iridl.ldeo.columbia.edu/SOURCES/.LDEO/.TRL/.NADA2004/.pdsi-atlas.html>.
- ³⁰ Frémont, *Frémont’s First Impressions*, 57–59; Krusik and Cook, “North American Drought Atlas.”
- ³¹ Box 60, Folder 3, Grace Raymond Hebard Papers, 1829–1947, Collection Number 400008, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming; Stamm, *People of the Wind River*, 35–40.
- ³² Stamm, *People of the Wind River*, 28–29, 34; Trenholm and Carley, *Shoshonis*, 120–23.
- ³³ Copy of Fort Bridger Treaty, July 2, 1863, Box 6, Folder 14, James K. Moore Family Papers, 1824–2001, Collection Number 00051, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming; Trenholm and Carley, *Shoshonis*, 301–7; Stamm, *People of the Wind River*, 35–40.
- ³⁴ Report on the Proceedings of the 1868 Fort Bridger Treaty Meeting, Box 53, Folder 8, Grace Raymond Hebard Papers, 1829–1947, Collection Number 400008, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming; Wind River Resume, as of December, 1976, Box 3, Folder 8, Virginia Cole Trenholm Papers, 1929–1979, Collection Number 3579, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.
- ³⁵ Report on the Proceedings of the 1868 Fort Bridger Treaty Meeting, Box 53, Folder 8, Grace Raymond Hebard Papers, 1829–1947, Collection Number 400008, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.