

on the country's wildlife was far from salutary. Although over-trapping, the characteristic vice of the fur trade, became evident first, with the large decline in the beaver population, there were other human activities that caused even greater destruction.

Nineteenth-century destruction

Agriculture, developing after the fur trade, often upset the soil cover and the natural plant growth on which wild animals depended, and destroyed the specialized ranges and habitats of many mammals and birds. An attitude that justified the extermination of wildlife on economic grounds alone dominated the continent during the first half of the nineteenth century. At least the fur traders were practical businessmen who realized that there were limits to the fur bearing crop they harvested. No considerations of economics and common sense restricted those who shot buffalo for hides and tongues, wildfowl for the food market and birds with bright feathers for the milliners. The exploitation of wildlife that began with the fur trade reached its climax in the slaughter of the last herds of plains bison late in the nineteenth century.

Early conservationists

Appalled by the record of wildlife destruction, the first handful of conservationists enunciated the principle that the renewable natural resources of wildlife, forests, water and land should

be protected and their use should, in some degree, be regulated. Land and water, and the plants and wildlife they supported, were recognized by these pioneers as resources that were not unlimited — that were not simply for the benefit and appetite of the current generation but were to be preserved for future generations.

Public opinion was slow to recognize the basic importance of this principle. The doctrines of the *laissez-faire* economists, the interests of the industrialists, and the illusion of unlimited natural resources constituted too strong an opposition. It was not until late last century that the people, and hence their governments, began, however grudgingly, to accept the need to conserve renewable resources and protect wildlife.

The national parks

This more enlightened attitude was responsible for the passage of the first provincial game acts and the creation of national parks. The first of these, now Banff National Park, was established in the Rocky Mountains in 1887. Protection of wildlife was not the primary purpose of the parks — birds and animals were considered an important part of a natural heritage that should be preserved for people to enjoy and appreciate. However, in effect, national parks are sanctuaries in which species native to these areas can exist free and protected.