

# Hunters at the Margin

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# Hunters at the Margin

Native People and Wildlife  
Conservation in the  
Northwest Territories

JOHN SANDLOS

FOREWORD BY GRAEME WYNN



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To the memory of David Buller and Lily Buller

Resource agencies have been structured not so much to be responsive to new learning, but to maintain control over resources, information, and people.

— R. Edward Grumbine, 1997

Modern statecraft is largely a project of internal colonization, often glossed, as it is in imperial rhetoric, as a “civilizing mission.” The builders of the modern nation-state do not merely describe, observe, and map; they strive to shape a people and landscape that will fit their techniques of observation.

— James C. Scott, 1998

Many wildlife professionals see themselves as custodians of a conservationist ethic that is above politics. This perspective sets them apart from those who manage resources such as timber, oil and gas, or minerals, although the promoter’s view is not unknown in wildlife agencies when a particular resource appears to have great commercial possibilities.

— Peter Usher, 1994

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## FOREWORD

# The Enigmatic North

by Graeme Wynn

ALTHOUGH PEOPLE OCCUPIED the northern circumpolar region thousands of years ago, notes Derek Hayes in his recent *Historical Atlas of the Arctic*, the area remained “a huge blank” on maps of the Western tradition until the end of the medieval period, “supporting nothing but theories as to what was there.”<sup>1</sup> From a cartographic point of view, this implied veil of ignorance was drawn back slowly but successfully as Western explorers, whalers, and others traversed, named, described, and charted this mysterious, elemental, beautiful but forbidding territory, until its capes and bays, coastlines and mountains were brought to Cartesian order on modern-day maps.

This is only part of the story, of course. Indigenous peoples who had occupied these areas for thousands of years had intimate knowledge and finely developed understanding of the northern territories that were their homelands. Most of those who came from afar to draw the features of the land into European atlases and Western worldviews were translators as much as creators of information about these vast spaces. Few were as explicit about their borrowing and dependence as the English adventurer Warburton Pike, who embarked late in the nineteenth century, on a “shooting expedition” into the “unknown land” of the Barren Grounds (previously traversed, it should be noted, by Samuel Hearne, the overland Franklin expedition, and others). Pike’s journey carried him “through a great deal of new country,” where he “discovered, as we white men say when we are pointed out some geographical feature by an Indian who has

been familiar with it since childhood” several lakes and streams that he attempted to mark on a rough map.<sup>2</sup>

Whatever the elisions and imprecision of newcomers’ encounters with them, the Arctic and sub-Arctic continue to hold Western imaginations in thrall. They remain “lands beyond,” unforgiving, sparsely inhabited and seldom travelled, expensive to cross, and at the same time fragile and vulnerable. Perhaps this helps to account for the surge of interest in ice-bound regions in recent years. Eric Wilson, who has both fostered and reflected upon this in *A Spiritual History of Ice*, observes that the *New York Times* reviewed five or six times as many books on polar subjects in the four years after 1997 as it did in the preceding six. Half a dozen years into the new millennium, evidence of rapid and extensive melting of the Arctic icecap and anxieties about the consequences of global warming have only heightened the “millennial disquiet” to which Wilson attributed the outpouring of polar meditations at the end of the twentieth century. Indeed, Wilson argues provocatively that ice (and by extension ice-bound regions) manifest “annihilation and restoration, horror and joy,” and thus share many of the paradoxes that mark Western visions of apocalypse.<sup>3</sup>

Be such sweeping claims as they may, the Canadian North remains hard to understand. Frequently referred to, rarely engaged, and surprisingly mutable, it is even, puzzlingly, somewhat itinerant. The idea of the “true North strong and free” holds a central, mythological place in the Canadian imagination, but quite where this North begins and what references to it mean have shifted through time and space, a detail too often ignored in easy assertions of continuity in conceptions of “Canada-as-North.” Typically such claims trace a smooth and unbroken arc from the voyages of polar explorers, through Robert Grant Haliburton’s essay “Men of the North,” to John Diefenbaker’s new vision of Canada as a northern nation and the defence of Canada’s claim to Arctic sovereignty late in the twentieth century. Thus English navigators such as Martin Frobisher and John Franklin are assimilated into a quintessentially Canadian story, and quite different imagined geographies are forced into a teleological historical narrative.<sup>4</sup>

In the second half of the nineteenth century, when enthusiasts for the new Dominion celebrated the invigorating properties of ozone-rich northern air and envisaged Canadians as “northmen of the New World,” given to tossing pine trees about in their glee, they had their eyes and minds fixed on the southern edge of the pre-Cambrian Shield and the agricultural potential of the great Northwest that lay beyond. These were northern realms from the vantage point of Toronto and neighbouring American states, but in latitudinal terms, at least, large areas of the nineteenth century’s

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storied “north woods,” as well as the Ontario town of North Bay, are closer to the tropics than is Vancouver. Despite Confederation-era politician D’Arcy McGee’s allegorical vision of Canada as a northern nation bounded by three oceans and thus rimmed by water like the shield of Achilles, the Arctic islands were not formally recognized as Canadian territory until 1880, and then the transfer took place in what one historian characterized as “a fit of absence of mind.” As the Colonial Office had it, they were annexed “to prevent the United States from claiming them, and not from the likelihood of their proving of any value to Canada.” Indeed, Janice Cavell has argued in the *Canadian Historical Review* that most nineteenth-century Canadians “did not see the Arctic as part of Canada at all”; in her view, an historical paradigm of east-west expansion and rural settlement – an agrarian rather than a northern myth – held sway among Canadians well into the twentieth century. By this account, proponents of northern development typically struggled against an “ingrained indifference to northern matters.”<sup>5</sup>

Given the attention afforded the Far North in recent decades, and the spectacular way in which the Yukon and Alaska were thrust into public consciousness by the Klondike Gold Rush of 1898, this might seem surprising. But the geographical and imaginative remoteness of Arctic and sub-Arctic Canada in the 1890s should not be underestimated. At the beginning of that decade, George M. Dawson of the Geological Survey of Canada published a map “Showing the Larger Unexplored Areas” of the country. There were sixteen of them, all extensive, and they encompassed the entire country north of the fifty-fifth parallel, as well as substantial tracts south of this between Lake Winnipeg and the coast of Labrador. As Warburton Pike saw it, apart from a few Hudson’s Bay Company trading posts and an occasional mission station, this “great northern country” was “entirely given up to what it was evidently intended for, a hunting-ground for the Indians.”<sup>6</sup>

A few years later, the American sportsman Caspar Whitney, who headed north on snowshoes into “a country which seemed to hold naught for the traveller but hardship,” began an account of his journey:

Far to the northwest, beginning ten days’ journey beyond Great Slave Lake and running down to the Arctic Ocean, with Hudson’s Bay as its eastern and Great Bear Lake and the Coppermine River as its western boundaries, lies the most complete and extended desolation on earth. [This is] the Barren Grounds ... [a] timberless waste where ice-laden blasts blow with hurricane and ceaseless fury ... ; where rock and lichen and moss replace soil and trees and herbage; and where death by starvation or freezing dogs the footsteps of the explorer.<sup>7</sup>

In more muted tones, Elihu Stewart, the Chief Inspector of Timber and Forestry in the Dominion Forestry Branch, began an account of his journey down the Mackenzie River in 1906 with the observation that “perhaps no portion of America has received greater attention from the explorer during the last three centuries than the Sub-Arctic regions of Canada, and yet they remain practically unknown to the present day.”<sup>8</sup> Enigma indeed. But it was journalist and historian Agnes Laut who best described the prevailing state of affairs when she echoed both Wilfrid Laurier’s confidence in Canada’s capacity to dominate the coming decades and Elihu Stewart’s lament in the title of her article “The Twentieth Century Is Canada’s: The Romantic Story of a People Just Discovering Their Own Country.” Before the year was out the federal government joined the chorus with *Canada’s Fertile Northland: A Glimpse of the Enormous Resources of Part of the Unexplored Regions of the Dominion.*<sup>9</sup>

“All Labrador, all Keewatin, all Mackenzie River, the most of the Peace river and Athabasca, nine-tenths of British Columbia, and the Yukon are still *terra incognita* for the prospector,” wrote Laut enticingly in 1907. Yet northern development was slow to gain momentum. Until the 1930s Canadian government initiatives in the North were mainly defensive and strategic, in response to American, Danish, and Norwegian claims to the area. In 1939 there were twenty or so police posts and about 16,000 non-Native residents in the Yukon and Northwest territories. Trading and mission locations aside, a dozen mines, a small oil field near Norman Wells, a communications network in the Mackenzie Valley, and a few radio direction-finding stations on Hudson Bay pretty much made up the sum of non-indigenous activity in this area. When it came during and after the Second World War, however, “discovery” proceeded at an astonishing pace. Then a powerful tide of development swept through the North, floated on dreams of what might be, fuelled by demand for new resources and facilitated by improvements in the technologies of communication.<sup>10</sup>

Construction of the Alcan highway to Alaska in the 1940s hauled formerly remote places and people into the maelstrom of the mid-twentieth century, and development of the Distant Early Warning (DEW) Line radar stations brought outsiders, jobs, southern commodities, and cash into the Far North as never before. As early as 1949 photographer Richard Harrington marvelled that the Arctic was then “less than a day away from Edmonton.” Every day a flight left the Alberta capital for Yellowknife, which it reached “in five hours ten minutes, including stopovers.” Northward from Yellowknife, there was “a monthly flight … to Coppermine, one

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hundred miles north of the Arctic Circle,” that took “something like six hours, including a halt at Port Radium.” This was a far cry indeed from the old days, when “it had taken months to cover that distance by canoe or dogsled.” Yet such was the intractability of this vast territory that a contemporary map of the Arctic published by *The National Geographic* declared that “the Northlands” were only “gradually revealing their secrets to man.” Indeed it is difficult, early in the twenty-first century, to appreciate just how haltingly and incompletely these northern territories were brought within the compass of a larger Canada.<sup>11</sup>

Half a century after Laut’s article appeared in *World’s Work*, the minister of northern affairs and national resources in the Diefenbaker government described the North as a “new world to conquer ... a great vault, holding in its recesses treasures to maintain and increase ... material living standards.” A few years later a brief essay written in the excited style characteristic of the *Imperial Oil Review* caught the new commercial and technological realities of the area on the fly:

Much of the time, it’s frigid and forbidding ... But somewhere under those wan winter suns, those tree stunted forests ... somewhere deep under the permafrost ... there may be oil [– almost 50 billion barrels of it]. Imperial’s assault on the Territories began in earnest in 1963 ... This past summer [1965] Imperial prospected ... by gravimeter ... In less than four months [the survey crew] helicopter-hopped around five million acres of the company’s territory.<sup>12</sup>

For a few short years it seemed that a cornucopia of Arctic resources made available by new knowledge and improved equipment would shape the future of Canada. Oil and mineral exploration proceeded apace. Academics planned for, promoters enthused about, and conference delegates considered the implications of northern development. Then the rising voice of indigenous northerners and growing public concern about environmental pollution changed the terms of public discourse. In 1977, the *Report of the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry*, chaired by Justice Thomas Berger, cautioned against the untrammeled exploitation of northern resources. By this account, a fragile environment, the lives that depended on traditional economies likely to be undermined by development, and the obligation to address indigenous land claims warranted the respect and attention of Canadians. At the very least, growth should be slowed to allow due consideration of these issues.<sup>13</sup>

Against this backdrop, *Hunters at the Margin* reminds us that the past is forever (like Warburton Pike's Barren Grounds) new country, open to (re)discovery and novel mappings. John Sandlos is not the first historian to direct his gaze northward or to consider nature conservation or wildlife management in Canada. This book takes its place alongside other scholarly accounts of northern development, from Shelagh Grant's discussions of sovereignty and security issues to Morris Zaslow's two volumes on the opening of the North and the northward expansion of Canada. Others have written frequently and well of the bison and the muskox and of the caribou and the crisis that afflicted them in the 1950s. And there is no dodging the fact that efforts at wildlife management by Canadian civil servants have been ably documented in other works.<sup>14</sup>

But if other authors have marked many of the features found in these pages in their accounts, their stories differ quite markedly from the one offered here. Sandlos brings fresh eyes and new questions to his exploration of this territory and traces a fascinating, revealing set of inscriptions on his welcome map of the North. His efforts force readers to think again about the contours of development and the intentional and inadvertent consequences that flow from the extension of power and authority over subject peoples and distant territories. More broadly, they invite reflection on the difficult and multifaceted relationships entailed in colonialism.

From one perspective, *Hunters at the Margin* finds its centre in conflict. It is an account of the struggles between Native peoples (whose traditional hunting districts extended through much of the Northwest Territories, or present-day Nunavut) and wildlife conservation officials (employed by the federal government to administer the three most important big game species – caribou, muskox, and wood bison – of this area). It recounts how officials anxious to put modern and scientific principles of game management into practice looked with disfavour upon Native hunting practices and sought to restrict indigenous peoples' exploitation of wildlife by imposing regulations, excluding them from designated areas, and changing their traditional patterns of behaviour. And it points out that Dene, Cree, and Inuit, whose lives depended, in many ways, upon the animals that roamed the North, resisted such strategies by voicing dissent, ignoring instructions, and disregarding the law.

Abstracted from its particular setting, the main line of this story is relatively familiar. Since the 1970s, there have been many accounts of social discord arising from restriction of local access to game and other resources, as state authority extended its tentacles over formerly remote territories and the wisdom of scientific experts was elevated above traditional, local

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knowledge. English historian Edward Thompson drew attention to struggles over the restriction of hunting and foraging rights in eighteenth-century England. The abjuration of indigenous peoples' traditional rights by colonial forest authorities has been well documented in various parts of the Indian subcontinent, and recent studies have done much to illuminate local resistance to these initiatives. Similar patterns have been discerned in the establishment of southern African game parks. In the United States, a small library of impressive studies has traced the ways in which Indian dispossession has been associated with the creation of national parks and the strong conviction that wilderness must be uninhabited. And Canadians have their own accounts of parallel developments in Ontario's Algonquin Park and recently in Banff National Park.<sup>15</sup>

But *Hunters at the Margin* is not just another expansive Canadian example of a well-worn tale. Although Sandlos reaffirms what others have demonstrated in part, that the quickening of northern economic development in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries posed a serious threat to northern wildlife, he extends and refines our understanding of how this happened and how it was perceived. He acknowledges that hunting pressures increased with the influx of people and that new markets for meat and hides encouraged Native hunters into new territories. Beyond this, however, he wants readers to understand that human impacts on northern environments precipitated ecological changes that cascaded through northern ecosystems and that these effects were poorly understood for several decades. If the "state of ecological unconsciousness" that some historians ascribe to those who planned the Alcan highway through Yukon territory in the 1940s was less marked east of the Rockies, the ecology of big game animals in this area was almost certainly less well understood than that of snowshoe hares (and other small mammals), which had been the focus of intensive investigation by the Oxford University animal ecologist Charles Elton.<sup>16</sup> Even in the 1950s, when the decline of caribou herds in some parts of the North came to be comprehended as a crisis, wildlife experts differed widely in their interpretation of the disaster. Many indicted the predatory behaviour of wolves, some lamented "orgies of killing" by Native peoples, and others simply attributed the problem to "a greatly increased [human] population over-burdening a depleted game population" (pp. 223, 222).

In these circumstances, it was relatively easy to conclude, as newcomers to the North and interested southerners were inclined to do, that efforts to protect northern wildlife were warranted. Sport hunters prized the game: Warburton Pike and Caspar Whitney were only two among dozens who set off across the northern prairies and into the mountains after

muskox, wood bison, and other species. Many other factors converged to focus attention on the place and plight of wildlife in the North. New ideas about conservation and preservation were in the air at the turn of the twentieth century. In the United States, Gifford Pinchot and John Muir were spokespeople for and symbols of less spendthrift attitudes to North American nature, and the movements they helped to define quickly had influence across the forty-ninth parallel. Canadians borrowed from American national park legislation in establishing their own remote parks, albeit initially for tourism, sport hunting, and game conservation rather than wilderness protection. Inspired by “Pinchotism,” they established the Commission of Conservation in 1909 to inventory and manage the “natural resources” of the country. In Canada between the wars, “Wild Goose” Jack Miner attained celebrity through his work in bird banding and conservation advocacy, while Ernest Thompson Seton, Charles G.D. Roberts, and Grey Owl produced dozens of immensely popular stories that made heroes of animals. South of the border, Aldo Leopold adapted and codified emerging ideas – about nature as a mechanistic system and Charles Elton’s insights into population dynamics and carrying capacity – into a new field, identified by the eponymous title of his 1933 book *Game Management*.<sup>17</sup>

After 1945, as northern development quickened and the “northern vision” of Prime Minister John Diefenbaker gripped the imaginations of Canadians, new bureaucratic, scientific, and professional approaches to wildlife management based on Leopold’s principles were added to the arsenal of schemes for the conservation of big game in the North. As the twentieth century ran its course, herds were surveyed, animal population counts were refined, enormous sanctuaries were established to protect muskox and caribou herds, indigenous hunting was monitored and restricted, and wolf eradication programs were implemented. Some of these measures pointed to and others were justified by reports of “slaughter” and “crisis.” Together they painted a canvas against which the very survival of big game in the North seemed to be at stake. Common and largely uncritical assessments of those who led endeavours to preserve and conserve the herds understandably tended to represent them as enlightened heroes.

Yet those efforts were rarely unambiguous. Although those involved in protecting northern wildlife sometimes justified regulations, sanctuaries, and other interventions by proclaiming the intrinsic value of wild animals, they sought to manage herds and people for many reasons. Plains bison were brought to Alberta from Montana early in the twentieth century in an attempt to preserve a species decimated by commercial hunters, but their relocation to Wood Buffalo National Park led to hybridization of

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plains and wood buffalo and the spread of tuberculosis. By the 1960s, a “strict management, slaughter, inspection and processing programme” had been implemented. This yielded “exotic” meat for sale to southern Canadian consumers, and the program of intervention was defended with the argument that its profits would underwrite the costs of bison management and contribute to the national economy.<sup>18</sup> Free-ranging caribou were also regarded as potential organic machines, capable, under appropriate management, of turning tundra and boreal vegetation into valuable meat. From such views of wildlife, it was but a short step to the conviction that profit units had to be protected, even at the cost of undermining traditional Native hunting cultures. To this end, the government endeavoured to shift indigenous hunting to marine resources and to ease perceived pressure on caribou herds by relocating and retraining indigenous groups in ways intended to facilitate their adaptation to the modern economy.

*Hunters at the Margin* reveals these ancillary, perhaps even subliminal, agendas and offers the fullest, and perhaps the most impressive, account yet of the ways in which efforts to conserve animals were linked with broader colonial initiatives. It lays bare the intimate connections between wildlife management strategies and other modernizing initiatives such as commercial development and the extension of bureaucratic order over people and nature. In this reading, wildlife conservation becomes as much a form of “institutionalized social control over indigenous people” as a response to declining big game populations (p. 192).

All this helps us to refine and sharpen our still incomplete understanding of the enigmatic North, of the intentions of those charged with the administration and development of these Arctic and sub-Arctic regions and the challenges they faced, and of the changing lives of the indigenous peoples who were its most numerous inhabitants throughout these years. If, in the end, Sandlos complicates the story of this time and place, it is both because it has a much more nuanced past than many earlier accounts have acknowledged and because he refuses to reduce to a formula the variable and contradictory impulses that shaped the actions of those about whom he writes.

Wildlife conservation strategies had enormous influence on the lives of many indigenous northerners, but many of those who implemented them wrestled to reconcile antimodernist sentiments with a strong faith in bureaucratic management, or preservationist ideals with the pragmatic demands of political superiors, just as Native peoples responded in different ways to the challenges and opportunities of a growing southern presence in their traditional territories. If colonialism entails the occupation of

hinterland territory and the subjugation of hinterland peoples by the apparatus of a distant state, Sandlos reminds us that it is often a messier and more variable process than the easy transformation of ecologies and societies by homogeneous and simplified management schemes that it is sometimes taken to be. Just as theorists often find the wayward world spilling beyond the grasp of their elegant constructs, so this thoroughly researched and closely detailed work reminds us that historians must use a broad palette in their analyses of societies replete with ambiguities and contradictions.

## Preface

MANY WRITERS HAVE DESCRIBED THEIR CRAFT as a solitary act, and certainly many lonely hours have been spent drafting and redrafting these chapters. But the creation of a book is also a collective endeavour, a distillation of thoughts and advice from a supportive cast generous enough to comment on work while it is still in progress. Certainly this volume could not have been written without the incisive commentary of many within the broader academic community. My doctoral supervisor at York University, Anders Sandberg, helped this work evolve from its genesis as a graduate term paper to its first full incarnation as a doctoral dissertation. Anders provided crucial guidance to my research and pointed criticism when I needed it the most. The two other members of my doctoral committee also contributed greatly to the development of the ideas within these pages. Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands not only helped refine several key concepts in the early drafts of this work, she constantly pushed me to paint its story on a much broader canvas than I might otherwise have done. Viv Nelles was an enthusiastic supporter of the project and provided vital commentary from the very beginning. Stephen Bocking offered extremely helpful comments in his capacity as the external member of my dissertation examining committee. Several colleagues and friends have granted critical observations on all or part of what became this book at various stages, including Matthew Evenden, Liza Piper, Alan MacEachern, Tom Nudds, and three anonymous scholars who reviewed the manuscript for UBC Press. Throughout my graduate school career, I have been fortunate enough to have encountered colleagues – Sherilyn MacGregor, Dean

Bavington, Jenn Cypher, Adrian Ivakhiv, and Nick Garside – whose work and ideas have been inspirational, and whose friendship helped me survive the gruelling process of writing a dissertation. Randy Schmidt and Graeme Wynn both provided enthusiastic editorial support and key advice on the difficult process of turning a dissertation into a book. My editors at UBC Press, Camilla Blakeley and Sarah Wight, provided invaluable suggestions at the final stages of the project. Finally, Rajiv Rawat and Seth Loader produced the beautiful maps that appear in this book.

Several institutions provided crucial assistance for the research and writing of this book: the Social Science and Humanities Research Council, the Ontario Graduate Scholarship program, the Faculty of Arts at Memorial University of Newfoundland, the Graduate Environmental Studies Students Association of York University, and the Faculty of Environmental Studies at York University. The Aid to Scholarly Publications Programme of the Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences generously provided a grant to support the publication of the book. The staff, archivists, and librarians at Library and Archives Canada, the Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre (Northwest Territories Archives), the Wood Buffalo National Park Library, and various university libraries also furnished a great deal of friendly assistance that was essential to the completion of this project.

I am extremely fortunate to have a family that has offered not only an enthusiastic reception for the ideas in this book but also tangible support for the project. My father, Hank, and my mother, Betty-Lou, have served as both audience and cheerleader for my academic work, and more recently they have provided indispensable child care. My mother-in-law, Coby Wiersma, also came faithfully once a week to spend time with her grandson and free precious hours to complete this manuscript. Other family members – Lisa, Karyn, Dave, Jude, Maya, and Zachary – have offered unwavering encouragement and a much-needed refuge from writing. My son, William, fell in love with books almost from the day he was born two years ago. Every time he pleaded for yet another reading of his favourite stories, he reminded me that a book should always be a gateway to wonder. Finally, I cannot begin to account for the ways in which my wife, Yolanda, has supported this project from its inception. Not only did she provide vital encouragement during some of the most difficult hours of writing and research, as an ecologist she also patiently advised me on the intricacies of bison population dynamics and predatory-prey relationships as a substitute for normal dinner conversation. She, more than anyone, helped to bring these pages to the light of day.

## A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

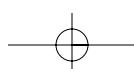
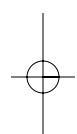
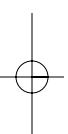
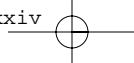
The archival documents used as the basis for this study generally do not distinguish among the ethnic and linguistic groupings of northern Aboriginal people, referring to them only as “Indians” or “Eskimos.” In keeping with contemporary convention, the Athapaskan-speaking people of the Mackenzie Valley are generally referred to in this work as the Dene, although the names of linguistic subgroups (e.g., Chipewyan, Dogrib, Gwich’in) are used when I am certain that the people being discussed are members of these particular groups. The hunting people of the High Arctic are referred to as the Inuit throughout the book. The Cree people of northern Alberta also enter this story in the early chapters.

Changes to the administrative structure surrounding wildlife conservation in the Northwest Territories were a frequent and complex phenomenon throughout the twentieth century. To further complicate matters, the federal government administered wildlife affairs through a variety of divisions and bureaus during the period (see Appendix 1 for a summary). These changes are highlighted in the text only when they bear upon the narrative. To avoid cluttering the story with needless detail and confusing the reader, I have often used such generic terms as “the northern administration,” “the federal wildlife bureaucracy,” and “the department.”

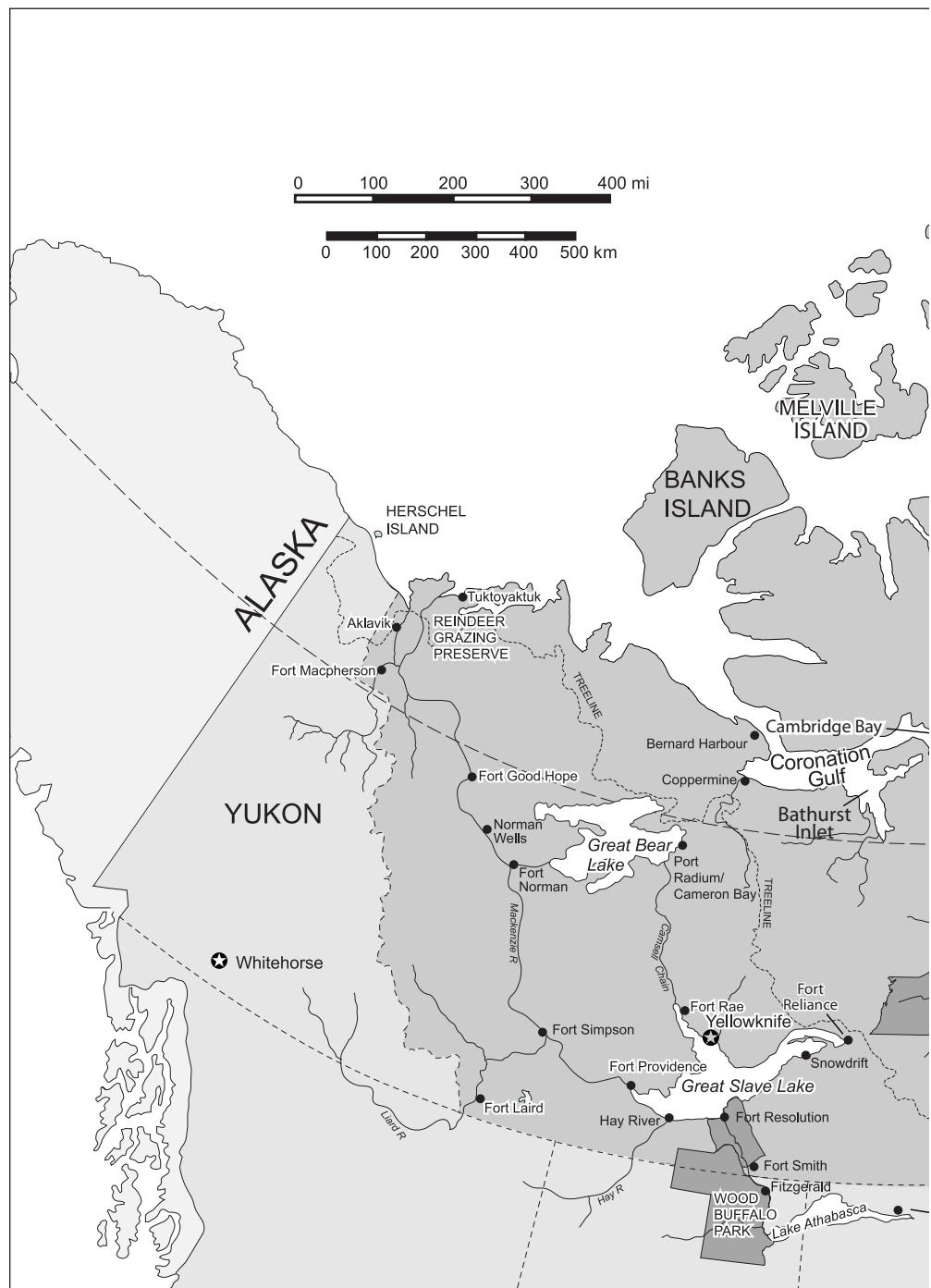
## CREDITS

A condensed version of Chapter 5 was published as “Landscaping Desire: Poetics, Politics and the Early Biological Surveys in the Canadian North,” *Space and Culture* 6, 4 (2003): 394-414. Parts of Chapters 2 and 3 appeared in “Where the Scientists Roam: Ecology, Management and Bison in Northern Canada,” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 37, 2 (2002): 93-129. This material has been used with permission from the respective publishers.

The photographs that open each of the main parts of the book are as follows: p. 22, a lone buffalo on a utility road in Wood Buffalo National Park, 25 August 1946, LAC C-148458; p. 110, muskox on Devon Island exhibiting typical protective circle behaviour, Percy Taverner, no date, LAC PA-48029; and p. 140, caribou on the south shore of Carey Lake, J.B. Tyrrell, 1893, LAC PA-37622.

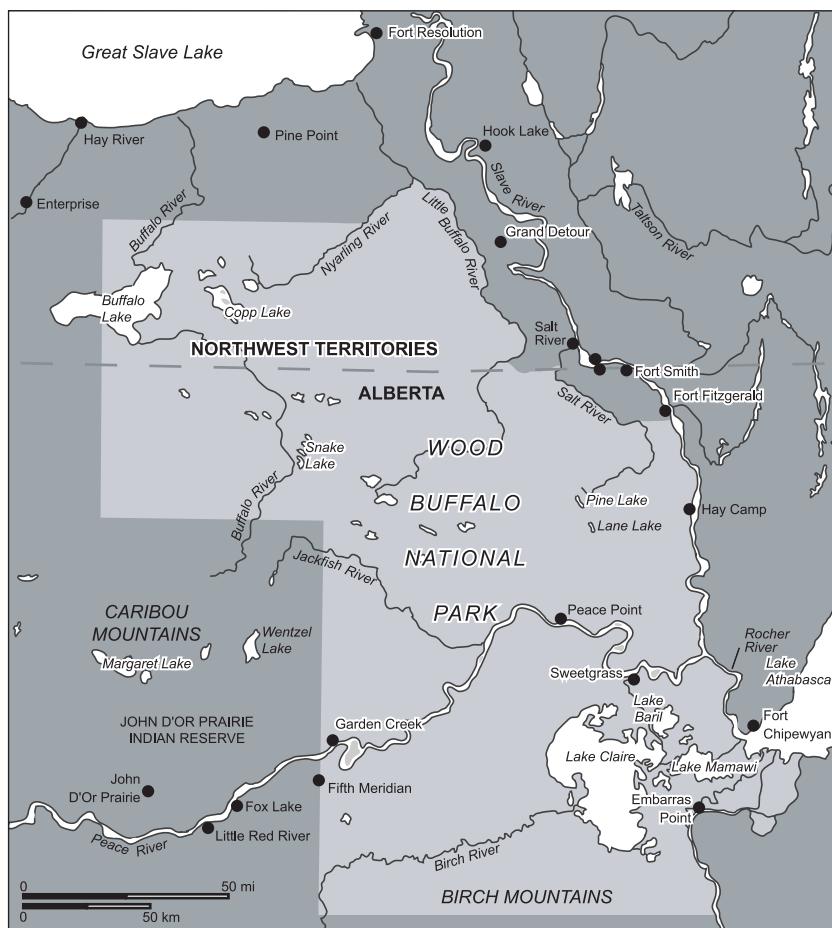


# Hunters at the Margin



Northwest Territories, 1921-40

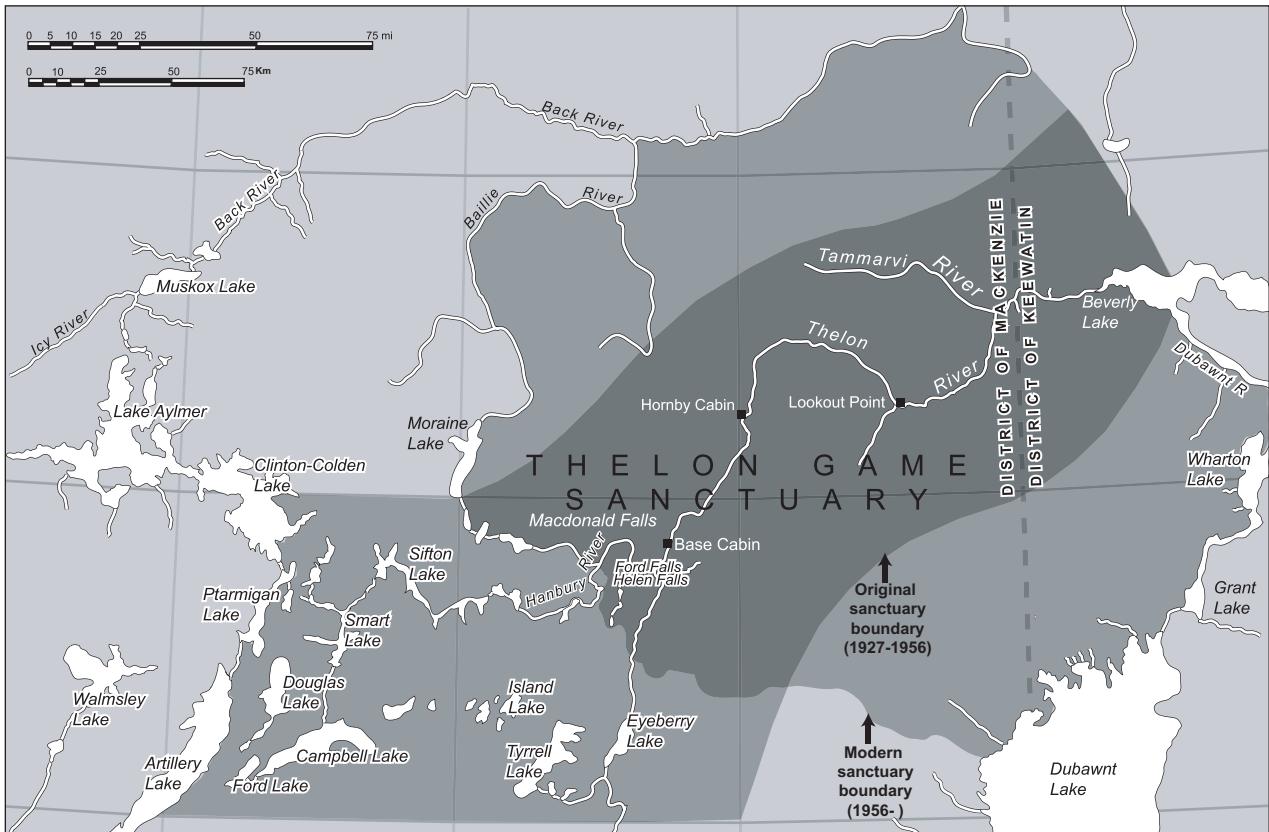




Wood Buffalo National Park



District of Keewatin



Thelon Game Sanctuary

# Introduction

## WILDLIFE AND CANADIAN HISTORY

ON 1 APRIL 1924, O.S. FINNIE WROTE A LETTER from the Canadian government to the “Indian people” of the Northwest Territories. As the director of the Department of the Interior’s Northwest Territories and Yukon Branch, Finnie was responsible for the conservation of wildlife in the vast stretch of Canadian territory north of the sixtieth parallel. Accordingly, the letter (which was to be distributed as a pamphlet throughout the territories) provided a cautionary tale of a tribe “far away to the East” that was a “stupid people” because they had killed all the caribou they could until none remained, leaving their children hungry and without warm clothing. To avoid such a fate, Finnie offered several pieces of advice to the Native hunters of the North: kill only caribou that are needed for food and clothing, shoot only bull caribou, kill wolves on sight, and avoid hunting in the late spring and early summer when caribou hides were unsuitable for human clothing. The letter also warned that any hunting of the rare muskox would make federal wildlife authorities “very angry.” Finnie nevertheless claimed that the government and the mounted police were the “true friends” of the Native hunter: “The Indians should do as they say because it is right.”<sup>1</sup>

Finnie’s letter is emblematic of the federal government’s paternalistic approach to wildlife conservation in the Northwest Territories through much of the twentieth century. From the passage of the first wildlife protective legislation specific to the Northwest Territories in 1894 until the devolution of control over wildlife policy to the territorial government in 1970, federal wildlife authorities assumed that state control over the

region's Aboriginal hunters was the only way to save big game populations such as the caribou, the muskox, and the wood bison.<sup>2</sup> There was no thought of implementing a co-operative approach to wildlife conservation during this period; the imposition of restrictive game laws, the enclosing of traditional hunting grounds within national parks and game sanctuaries, and the introduction of police and game wardens to the area were all part of a process whereby the federal state began to assert unconditional authority over the traditional hunting cultures of the Dene and Inuit, as well as the Cree inhabitants of Wood Buffalo National Park.<sup>3</sup> Native hunters were expected to submit to the remote authority of federal wildlife officials because, as Finnie's letter put it, the bureaucrats were "right." Indeed, the prevailing sentiment among conservationists in Canada through much of the twentieth century was that Native hunters in the Northwest Territories were incapable of conserving wildlife; only the rational intervention of the experts in the state bureaucracy could prevent the wholesale destruction of wildlife at the hands of northern Aboriginal people. Roy A. Gibson, the long-serving deputy commissioner of the Northwest Territories, summarized the attitude of federal wildlife officials in 1949 when he wrote, "Too often, I am afraid, the native mentality is left unconvinced by the logic of conservation and regards game laws as simply another of the white man's eccentricities."<sup>4</sup>

What Gibson dismissed as ignorance was more probably widespread political opposition to state conservation initiatives among Native hunters in the Northwest Territories. Dene and Inuit communities throughout the Northwest Territories, and also those Cree who hunted and trapped in Wood Buffalo National Park, formally resisted their marginalization from federal wildlife conservation programs through letters, petitions, and boycotts of treaty payments. Less formally, Native hunters simply refused to obey the game laws, hunting the animals they regarded as a birthright. In either case, many Native northerners bitterly resented the meddling of outsiders who purported to be managing northern wildlife in the best interest of local people. From the early twentieth century, the question of who rightfully controlled the wildlife of the Northwest Territories became one of the most intense sources of controversy between Native hunters and the Canadian federal government.

The historical antagonism between Native hunters and state officials in the Canadian North has much in common with the long international history of social conflict over local access to wildlife for the purpose of food and commodity production. Throughout the globe, the imposition of game regulations and other conservation measures in the rural periphery

has engendered political discord: peasants versus wealthy landowners, local “squatters” versus elite sport hunters, indigenous people versus colonial authorities, and rural wildlife harvesters versus urban naturalists and wildlife enthusiasts. In England, conflict over access to game goes back to the Game Act of 1671, which designated hunting as the exclusive privilege of the landed gentry and marked the beginning of the “poaching wars” between the aristocracy and rural peasants that lasted for the better part of the next two centuries.<sup>5</sup> The essence of this dispute was exported to the rich big game areas of Africa and South Asia during the height of nineteenth-century European imperialism as increasing numbers of elite sport hunters travelled to the far-flung reaches of Empire in search of trophies. These hunters were generally contemptuous of local hunting customs, objecting both to the utilitarian nature of the hunt and to specific practices – particularly the use of traps and snares or firing into herds – that violated a sportsman’s code founded on such sacrosanct principles as the careful stalking of the quarry and the use of only one bullet per animal. The sport hunting fraternity worked through lobby groups such as the Society for the Preservation of the Wild Fauna of Empire to convince the colonial authorities to impose game laws and establish wildlife preserves that would restrict local access to bush meat.<sup>6</sup> A rich vein of recent historical scholarship has suggested that sport hunters and nature enthusiasts in the United States practised a similar inequitable form of conservation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This period witnessed the dawn of a conservation movement that imposed game laws to limit the hunting activities of rural “squatters” and expelled resident Native and non-Native people alike from lands that were enclosed as private game preserves or set aside by the federal government to preserve the fading wilderness landscape of a rapidly closing western frontier.<sup>7</sup> Legal instruments such as game regulations or the expropriation of land were thus as much an expression of political power over marginalized hinterland communities as they were the product of a practical wildlife conservation strategy.

The few major works on the history of wildlife conservation in Canada have tended to ignore the political conflicts surrounding state game protection initiatives, instead depicting the conservationist protagonists as wholly enlightened and heroic figures.<sup>8</sup> Although Tina Loo’s recently released *States of Nature* and several regional studies from Atlantic and western Canada have begun to challenge this dominant narrative,<sup>9</sup> the classic account of the early wildlife conservation movement in Canada remains Janet Foster’s *Working for Wildlife*, an unequivocally celebratory book first published in 1978 and now in its second edition. Foster’s monograph was

clearly influenced by several of the pioneering works of American environmental history published in the 1970s, books that tended to extol the virtues of wilderness activists such as John Muir and Aldo Leopold. Such people rejected the prevailing “doctrine of usefulness” associated with the progressive conservation movement in favour of a preservationist philosophy that advocated the strict protection of wilderness and wildlife in national parks and other nature preserves.<sup>10</sup> Foster contends, however, that preservationist thought in Canada did not originate with prophetic wilderness philosophers such as Muir and Leopold, but grew instead out of the heroic work of a few enlightened and dedicated federal government employees such as Dominion Entomologist C. Gordon Hewitt, Parks Commissioner James Harkin, and Maxwell Graham, chief of the Parks Branch’s Animal Division. She describes Harkin, for instance, as a heroic figure whose efforts to advance the cause of wildlife conservation were fifty years ahead of his time. Graham, in turn, “helped to advance a policy of wildlife preservation throughout the Dominion,” while Hewitt’s tireless work made him “the most energetic and effective advocate of wildlife preservation within the Canadian civil service.”<sup>11</sup> Written nearly two decades after Foster’s volume, Michel Girard’s history of the Commission of Conservation, *L’écologisme retrouvé*, also paints a largely celebratory picture of Hewitt’s role promoting the protection of caribou, muskox, and migratory birds within the halls of the federal government.<sup>12</sup> In a more recent full-length study titled *A Passion for Wildlife*, J. Alexander Burnett heaps similar praise on the biologists who worked for the Canadian Wildlife Service (CWS) after its creation in 1947 as among “our unsung Canadian heroes.”<sup>13</sup> Undoubtedly, the work of Foster, Girard, and Burnett has contributed significantly to our understanding of the broad achievements of federal wildlife officials over the past century. These authors are correct to assert that important conservation initiatives such as the International Treaty for the Protection of Migratory Birds of 1916, the protection of the last remaining free-roaming bison herds, the modest recovery of the whooping crane, and the establishment of the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada would have been unthinkable without the energetic support of the wildlife conservationists within the CWS and the wider federal bureaucracy.

And yet the history of wildlife conservation in Canada is more complex than the overly laudatory interpretations of Foster, Girard, and Burnett allow. A close examination of the writings, policies, and actions of the federal government’s conservation bureaucrats and biologists shows that they were not visionaries who sat outside of the political currents and eddies of their own historical period, but were instead adherents to many of the

## Wildlife and Canadian History

II

prevailing cultural and ideological influences that shaped the wider North American conservation movement. For example, Canada's early wildlife conservationists subscribed equally to Gifford Pinchot's mainstream progressive-era doctrine of conserving natural resources for their economic value and to Muir's more radical vision of preserving wilderness and wildlife for their intrinsic worth. Certainly many contemporary environmentalists would find little to admire in Maxwell Graham's frequent appeals to conserve the wood bison for their "valuable robe" and "first-class beef qualities."<sup>14</sup> James Harkin may have written eloquently of the aesthetic and sentimental reasons for protecting wildlife, but he also sat on a royal commission that advocated the domestication of barren ground caribou and muskox as livestock for a northern ranching industry.<sup>15</sup> Gordon Hewitt's sense of awe at the mysterious "lure of the wild" was tempered by his enthusiastic support for such initiatives as a caribou meat industry in northern Canada and the experimental cross-breeding of buffalo with cattle to create an ideal type of range animal.<sup>16</sup> The combination of such contradictory motivations within Canada's early conservation movement suggests that the philosophical dichotomy between "preservationist" and "conservationist" philosophies was not as rigid in the early twentieth century as some environmental historians have presumed.<sup>17</sup> Above all else, conservationists such as Harkin, Hewitt, and Graham were both practical administrators and idealists, willing to combine the lofty aesthetic associated with an emerging wilderness ethic and the more practical language of the commercial promoter in order to inspire public support or political action. Furthermore, nothing suggests that these conservationists understood these arguments as inconsistent or contradictory, or that they employed the strategy of "protective coloration" – adopting the rhetoric of managing wildlife in national parks and nature preserves for the purposes of state production while covertly attempting to implement more preservationist policies – that historian Doug Weiner has argued was the modus operandi for state wildlife bureaucrats in the Soviet Union during the early twentieth century.<sup>18</sup> Instead, the bureaucratic movement to protect wildlife in Canada was flexible enough to accommodate both the antimodernist desire to preserve wildlife as the most visible remnant of an authentic but fading wilderness and the modern faith in bureaucratic management as a means to cultivate and manage wildlife populations for recreational and commercial purposes.<sup>19</sup>

In either case, the subsistence hunting economies of Aboriginal people were excluded from the prevailing definitions of conservation adopted by the federal wildlife bureaucracy in the early twentieth century. Indeed,

wildlife conservationists in Canada often held contemptuous views of Aboriginal hunting practices, a discourse that took on racist overtones as bureaucrats, naturalists, and biologists routinely interpreted reports of “wasteful” wildlife slaughters as the outgrowth of more general “primordial bloodlust” among Native hunters. Although the popular image of the primitive Native hunter as an environmental paragon living in harmony with the natural world had gained a degree of cultural currency throughout North America due to the rise of antimodern sentiment, promoters of this image such as the naturalist Ernest Thompson Seton, the author and painter Arthur Heming, and the Native poseur Grey Owl tended to reserve their idealized representations for the Natives of a distant past unsullied by contact with modern civilization.<sup>20</sup> Canadian wildlife conservationists often adapted this idea to their own political agenda, arguing that Native hunters who had been tainted by contact with guns, whisky, and unscrupulous traders had become incongruous in a wilderness landscape containing the continent’s last pristine wildlife populations. But regardless of whether federal wildlife officials disparaged Aboriginal hunters as inherently destructive toward wildlife or as a fallen people whose harmonious relationship to wildlife had been destroyed by contact with whites, they reached an identical conclusion: the presence of unruly Native hunters in Canada’s hinterland regions was inimical to the implementation of modern and scientific wildlife management intended to produce a usable surplus of wild game. The nearly universal denigration of Native hunting practices thus served an important legitimating function for federal wildlife officials; the assertion of state authority over people and wildlife at the periphery could be justified because the subsistence cultures were somehow deficient in their relationship to wildlife. By the account of most conservationists, both Aboriginal people and the animals they hunted needed the rational guidance of state wildlife managers in order to have any chance of survival.

The prevalence of such sentiments among Canada’s early wildlife bureaucrats suggests a counternarrative to the overly laudatory historical interpretation of the conservation movement in this country: the introduction of federal wildlife programs to Canada’s hinterland regions constituted an assertion of state authority over local people and wildlife populations, following a similar pattern to the colonial advance of state conservation initiatives in other parts of the globe. Of course, important distinctions can be drawn between colonial expansion in Canada and the establishment of European imperial holdings in Africa and Asia. Canada obviously never attained the status of an imperial power that was capable of imposing

administrative rule over large indigenous populations on distant continents. It was instead a settler colony, one that, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, was intent on occupying the vast stretches of territory on the western plains and displacing the resident indigenous population within a reservation system.<sup>21</sup> At the dawn of the twentieth century, the colonization of the West had largely been completed and the federal government had begun to turn its gaze toward its northern territories, commissioning geologists, naturalists, and explorers to report on the potential for agricultural settlement in the region.<sup>22</sup> The first generation of conservation bureaucrats in Canada eagerly embraced and promoted colonization schemes in the northern territories, encouraging initiatives such as domestication and rational management of wildlife populations on vast ranches so that the North might be transformed from a homeland for hunters and trappers to a region bustling with settlement and industry. The colonial rhetoric surrounding such wildlife conservation initiatives received broad popular expression in the narratives of naturalists and sport hunters who paid tribute to the commercial potential of northern wildlife while condemning the region's indigenous hunting cultures as a wasteful and destructive element of the northern environment, a resident population that would therefore benefit greatly from the introduction of a European agricultural economy and a modern scientific approach to game management. Wildlife conservation was only one of several institutional agents of colonialism that brought profound changes to the Aboriginal cultures of northern Canada, most notably missionary education and later the introduction of wage employment associated with large-scale industrial resource exploitation. Moreover, the various institutions that asserted colonial authority over northern Aboriginal people rarely presented a unitary perspective on the issue of wildlife conservation. Roman Catholic missionaries and the Department of Indian Affairs tended, for example, to oppose restrictive game conservation measures, particularly if they harmed the material well-being of Native hunters and might lead to mounting relief bills.<sup>23</sup> Nonetheless, by the end of the 1920s, conservation had become a pervasive influence in the lives of many Native hunters, one of the main administrative instruments through which the state was able to reshape human relationships to local environments in large areas of the Canadian hinterland.

The bureaucratic enthusiasm for settling the North as a wildlife ranching area faded at the end of the 1930s for logistical and budgetary reasons, but the discourse surrounding northern wildlife conservation retained much of the colonial culture associated with the earlier expansionist movement.<sup>24</sup> The image of the Native hunter as a reckless killer of game remained the

primary justification for wildlife conservation programs in the Far North through the interwar and postwar periods; federal wildlife officials responded to this stereotype with the gradual imposition of increasingly rigid forms of control over Aboriginal hunting activities in the region. This replacement of supposedly deficient local traditions and customs with a more appropriately modern approach to wildlife management took many forms (and it is here that one can observe the most obvious similarities with wildlife conservation programs in the colonized areas of Africa and South Asia). Regulatory restrictions on “excessive” hunting practices (often imposed by a territorial council consisting of appointed federal bureaucrats), the exclusion of local people from legislated wilderness areas, and coercive attempts to “educate” Native hunters about alternative resources such as fish and marine mammals all were common elements of federal conservation programs in northern Canada until the gradual devolution of authority over wildlife to the territorial government was completed in 1970. The result for many Native hunters was an erosion of sovereignty over wildlife and other local resources and the imposition of outside control over the most basic elements of their traditional subsistence cultures.

In terms of political boundaries, the landmass north of the sixtieth parallel that today consists of the Northwest Territories and Nunavut offers the most important regional setting in which to investigate the colonial nature of early federal wildlife conservation programs in Canada. Undoubtedly, many other areas of the country saw historical moments of conflict between local hunters and federal game authorities (particularly within the national parks), but the Northwest Territories is the only large contiguous landmass in Canada where the federal government retained constitutional authority over wildlife throughout much of the twentieth century. In addition, the Northwest Territories was one of the last regions of the continent to contain significant numbers of herd animals after the collapse of the plains bison in the late nineteenth century. Vast herds of migratory caribou still roamed the tundra and subarctic forests in numbers approaching the former glory of the bison herds, small herds of the exotic muskox still dotted the Arctic landscape, and the last free-ranging herds of bison in Canada wandered the region south of Great Slave Lake.<sup>25</sup> It is no wonder, then, that the Northwest Territories became a repository for many of the grandest ambitions of the federal government with respect to wildlife conservation.

The human geography of the Northwest Territories also contributed to the unique history of wildlife conservation in the region. The majority of people in this region have been, and continue to be, of Aboriginal descent,

a population of relatively independent hunters and trappers who have never been displaced by the settlement rush that condemned so many Native people in the southern reaches of the continent to live on small reserves. Broadly speaking, the indigenous population of the region comprises two major linguistic groups. The Athapaskan speakers – now more commonly referred to as the Dene – who inhabit the subarctic regions near the tree-line include such linguistic subgroups as the Chipewyan, Dogrib, Slavey, Hare, Mountain Dene, Sahtu-Dene, and the Gwich'in. The Inuktitut-speaking Inuit hunters of the Far North live from the Arctic tundra interior to the vast Arctic Archipelago. Subgroups include the Inuvialuit and Copper Inuit of the western Arctic, the Iglulik and Baffinland Inuit of Baffin Island, and the Netsilik, Sallirmiut, and Caribou Inuit of the eastern Arctic.<sup>26</sup> Also spread throughout the subarctic region is a significant Métis population, some of whom arrived with the fur trade from the French-Métis settlements of Manitoba in the mid-eighteenth century, and others from a distinctive cultural group that arose through marriage between Dene women and European traders. Although many northern Métis were completely absorbed within the hunting and trapping economy and cultural life of the Dene, a unique social and economic life did emerge in the larger trading posts where many northern Métis served as economic and cultural middlemen in the fur trade. These northern Métis often maintained strong social ties with their Dene brethren but also adopted European social and cultural mores because of the distinctive roles they were granted at the large fur trading companies as guides, traders, clerks, and post managers.<sup>27</sup>

For many Native northerners, the federal government's efforts to restrict access to important game species represented a direct threat to their cultural life as hunters and fur harvesters. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, most Dene and Inuit in the Northwest Territories lived largely on the land in small and widely scattered hunting settlements, particularly during the winter trapping season, when the procurement of furs was integrated with a traditional seasonal round that included the taking of moose, muskox, wood bison, snowshoe hare, marine mammals, and fish (depending on regional availability). For many northern hunting groups, the large herds of barren ground caribou that migrated through the subarctic forests and Arctic tundra were an incalculably important source of food and raw material.<sup>28</sup> As late as the 1950s, certain Dene and Inuit groups were almost wholly reliant on caribou for food and clothing; even today the species provides a large portion of the fresh meat in many northern Aboriginal communities.<sup>29</sup> The hunting and gathering of food and fur were also fundamental to social and cultural life in most Dene and Inuit

communities. The rhythms of daily and seasonal life were largely organized around such activities as running traplines, checking fish nets, tracking the movements of large game, preparing meat for storage, and manufacturing clothing from hides. Collective hunting and particularly the sharing of meat helped to structure and reinforce kinship ties and group solidarity in many Dene and Inuit bush settlements.<sup>30</sup> Game animals – particularly the caribou – also held a place of great importance within Dene and Inuit songs and stories.<sup>31</sup> Almost inevitably, the cultures of the Dene and Inuit came into conflict with the federal government's conservation programs: life on the land was impossible without access to animals.

The specific reactions of Native northerners to federal wildlife conservation policies are often difficult to discern from an archival record that overwhelmingly privileges the perspective of government officials. The barriers of language and literacy restricted the individual voices of northern Aboriginal people on issues of game conservation to a very few protest letters and petitions scattered within the voluminous official correspondence on wildlife issues. Oral history collections reveal much about the life that the Native elders lived on the land, but the tendency among participants to emphasize the practical and beneficial aspects of the independent bush life of past decades often obscures the history of conflict between Native hunters and wildlife officials in the Northwest Territories.<sup>32</sup> Nonetheless, a vivid impression of the anger directed at federal wildlife conservation programs emerges from the reports of government agents that lived in northern Aboriginal communities. Although one must be careful to read through the biases of outsiders living within an alien culture, the correspondence of Indian agents, the mounted police, game wardens, missionaries, and other local representatives provides an important record of organized political opposition to wildlife conservation in the form of treaty boycotts, the oral representations of Native leaders, and lobbying on behalf of those charged with offences against the game laws. It is also possible to interpret many recorded infractions of the game laws as a political reaction by Native hunters to the imposition of wildlife conservation. What federal wildlife officials dismissed as mere poaching or carelessness with campfires might also be understood as an attempt to reassert traditional patterns of hunting and burning on the landscape. Although the archival sources exclude much of the interior conversation among Native northerners on the issue of wildlife conservation, the existing records do provide an unambiguous picture of the hostile response Native hunters displayed toward federal wildlife conservation programs in the Northwest Territories.

In order to highlight the intensity of the historical conflict between conservationists and subsistence hunters in the Northwest Territories, this book has been written not as a detailed overview of federal wildlife policy but as an episodic account of disputes over access to three of the region's most important large game animals: wood bison, muskox, and caribou. Although access to small game and fur-bearers also sparked intense discord between Native hunters and conservationists, the charismatic big game species attracted the most attention from conservationists and in turn provoked the most embittered protests from Native hunters over restrictions on access to their basic food sources. Moreover, unlike moose, for instance, caribou, muskox, and wood bison were all believed to be threatened with endangerment or extinction, a circumstance that created a crisis atmosphere in the federal wildlife bureaucracy and prompted calls for action from conservationists outside of government.

The response of the federal government to these wildlife crises can be divided into four periods of vacillating interest in wildlife that were largely dependent on the general levels of bureaucratic interest in the northern territories. The first tentative demonstration of a desire to protect northern wildlife on the part of the federal government can be traced to a ban on all wood bison and muskox hunting by non-Native hunters established in 1894. Three years later, the federal government dispatched a small number of mounted police to the Northwest Territories to conduct an anti-poaching patrol on the bison ranges near Fort Smith. Despite this early enthusiasm, however, a regular patrol of game guardians was not established on the northern bison range until the Department of Forestry assigned two wardens to the area in 1912.

This period of relative indifference ended in 1917, when authority over wildlife in the northern territories was transferred to the Dominion Parks Branch, an administrative shuffle that granted wildlife enthusiasts such as James Harkin and Maxwell Graham broad power to form wildlife policy in the Northwest Territories. The end of the First World War also coincided with a growing fascination among federal officials with the idea of domesticating muskox and caribou (and also importing European reindeer) as an agricultural base for settlement of the North. Government interest in the economic opportunities associated with mineral and hydrocarbon development also resulted in the creation of the first administrative unit devoted exclusively to the region in 1921. Under its first and only director, O.S. Finnie, the Northwest Territories and Yukon Branch pursued an activist stance on issues such as health, education, and wildlife conservation. A rigid supporter of strict wildlife policies in the Northwest

Territories, Finnie was one of the first advocates of relocating Native hunters as a means of protecting local wildlife populations. This administrative enthusiasm for wildlife conservation had several important results: the passage of a more stringent Northwest Game Act in 1917 and again in 1929, the creation of Wood Buffalo National Park in 1922 and the Thelon Game Sanctuary in 1927, and the transfer of nearly seven thousand plains bison to the supposedly understocked northern bison ranges between 1925 and 1928.

This wildlife activism largely came to an end at the beginning of the 1930s, however, as reduced budgets for the Department of the Interior brought about the dissolution of the Northwest Territories and Yukon Branch in 1931 and an attendant reduction in the number of game wardens, police, and administrative staff in the Northwest Territories. Although this relative bureaucratic neglect of northern wildlife lasted through the Great Depression until the end of the Second World War, there were some innovations in conservation policy. Roy A. Gibson, the administrative chief of the Northwest Territories throughout much of this period, maintained a consistent interest in conservation and wildlife issues. Under his direction, northern field agents made the first attempts to divert Native hunters from caribou to alternative resources such as fish and marine mammals. Gibson was also among the first federal officials to articulate a policy of coercive relocation for hunters living near threatened wildlife populations. Between 1943 and 1947, Gibson and several Royal Canadian Mounted Police officers strongly advocated for the removal of several hunters from close proximity to the caribou herds of interior Baffin Island.

These new approaches to conserving northern wildlife laid the groundwork for a period of intense intervention in the lives of northern Native hunters between 1946 and 1970. The general postwar renewal of the federal bureaucracy allowed for a major increase in the number of federal field agents (police officers, game wardens, etc.) able to supervise the hunting activities of Native northerners. In addition, in 1947 the Canadian Wildlife Service was created, a government agency devoted exclusively to wildlife research and management in areas of federal jurisdiction. The wildlife service's biologists were deeply involved with many northern wildlife programs. Not only did the CWS conceive of a scheme to control the spread of tuberculosis in the northern bison herds by holding commercial slaughters in Wood Buffalo National Park, the agency also produced a flood of scientific reports pointing to an apparent massive decline in the mainland caribou herds that sparked an unprecedented flurry of conservation activism. At the urging of the CWS biologists, the northern administration

strengthened the protective regulations for caribou, and federal wildlife officials also embarked on a program designed to alter fundamentally the subsistence hunting cultures of northern Aboriginal people. Through education campaigns and direct supervision, the federal government sought to "help" the Dene and Inuit abandon the caribou hunt by exploiting alternative food resources more efficiently or becoming wage labourers within the expanding northern industrial economy. In its most extreme manifestation, this new policy regime provided at least part of the rationale for one of the most autocratic program initiatives ever implemented by the northern administration: the relocation of Native hunters away from the caribou herds of the Arctic interior to coastal areas where they might be "rehabilitated" as fishers, whalers, or industrial workers. More than any other incident discussed in this book, this wide-ranging response to the postwar caribou crisis illustrates the extent to which wildlife conservation had an all-encompassing influence on the lives of many Native hunters, as the state attempted to manage and control the most basic elements of their traditional subsistence cultures.

Might the intervention of federal officials in the lives of the Dene, the Inuit, and the Cree hunters of Wood Buffalo National Park have been a just and necessary means of protecting northern wildlife populations that were on the brink of extinction? Certainly one cannot simply assume that the Aboriginal hunters of the Northwest Territories were living in a state of equilibrium with local wildlife populations. As the anthropologist Shepard Krech has argued so persuasively, the contemporary cultural stereotype of an "ecological Indian" living in a state of harmony with nature has tended to obscure the archaeological and historical evidence suggesting that some groups of Aboriginal hunters in North America exacted a devastating toll on local wildlife populations.<sup>33</sup> As in other parts of the continent, Native hunters in the Northwest Territories did at times overhunt certain wildlife populations, sometimes to devastating effect. The extirpation of the caribou from the Mackenzie Delta region in the late nineteenth century, in large measure due to the participation of Aboriginal people in the meat and hide trade on the Arctic coast, stands as a testament to this fact. But did the Native hunters of the Northwest Territories always kill wildlife to the point of excess, as many conservationists claimed? Much of the sentiment regarding the wanton hunting practices of Native people was built on a foundation of observer bias, racial stereotyping, and inaccurate second-hand reporting. Even in cases where the federal government's concerns over the impact of Native hunting on particular wildlife population were legitimate, one may still find more to admire in the

intent of their action than in their paternalistic approach to conservation. As Krech himself argues, the fact that historical incidents of Aboriginal overkill did occur does not undermine the right or the ability of Native hunters to manage local wildlife populations in partnership with state experts, as in many of the recent co-management arrangements in the Canadian North.<sup>34</sup>

If Canada's early conservationists were blind to this option, perhaps the fundamental problem with their agenda rested not with its purpose but with its method. Until recent decades, the wildlife conservation movement in Canada was largely indifferent to the concerns of local people, often with dire consequences for the human and natural communities that lay in its path. Moreover, although the Canadian wildlife conservation movement may have been born out of a noble principle – the saving of that which is irreplaceable – its emphasis on domesticating northern wildlife populations for commercial purposes suggests that it did not always live up to this ideal. Writing in a broad context almost thirty years ago, the environmental philosopher John Livingston argued that wildlife conservationists failed to stem the swelling tide of species extinctions in the twentieth century because they embraced a managerial and scientific approach to their mission that valued living things only if they were useful to human beings.<sup>35</sup> Certainly Livingston's critique of an excessively human-centred approach to conservation can be readily applied to the proposals for northern wildlife ranches put forward by such early figures as Hewitt, Harkin, and Graham. It is likely, however, that the northern Aboriginal hunters who lost control over their subsistence hunting practices through the twentieth century held a differing view of conservation from Livingston. For them, the practice of wildlife conservation in Canada was not human centred enough.

## PART I

### BISON