

Adding Value . . .

ABSTRACT

First Nations Perspectives on the Grasslands of the Interior of British Columbia, by Michael D. Blackstock and Rhonda McAllister. *Journal of Ecological Anthropology* 8(1):24–46.

Although the First Nations Elders from the interior of southern British Columbia, Canada, recall times when grass was “belly-high to a horse,” today they worry about the deteriorated state of the grasslands. Using ethnographic and historical research methods, this paper documents recognized First Nations experts’ historical memory of the grasslands. Based on the ethnographic accounts, this paper also attempts to reconstruct the effects of colonization on the grassland ecology and First Nations culture. Secondary sources such as early settlers’ accounts and current grassland ecology research are used to augment the testimony of the experts. Two eras are described: 1) Pre-contact era (the three hundred years prior to contact); and 2) Post-contact era (1846-present). The horse, elk, and sharp-tailed grouse were common on the pre-contact grasslands. Overgrazing of the grasslands occurred soon after the miners and gentlemen ranchers brought in their horses and cattle. Sagebrush increased proportionately to the decrease in grasses. The First Nations culture changed from gathering sustenance off the grasslands to servicing the needs of the new settlers, and then to marginalization by industrial agriculture. A key argument of the paper is that when First Nations’ access to water was diverted by settlers and the wetlands were drained, cultivated, and polluted (both culturally and ecologically), First Nations’ access to the grassland was restricted. The paper concludes by defining grassland restoration from a social and ecological perspective and proposes that water be a key focus of the restoration process.

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