

Reading Log #1

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HISTORY 1120-01
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September 17th, 2018

Hunting and gathering was a vital practice amongst every native tribe that allowed for survival. In the book, “Imagining Head-Smashed-In: Aboriginal Buffalo Hunting on the Northern Plains” by Jack Brink, the author discusses how buffalo trap drastically changed the lives of the native people who settled within the Plains. Head-Smashed-In was a popular buffalo killing site amongst Plains culture as it brought the people of the Plains together, had a unique structure that allowed for successful mass killings, and carries a story that has been carried forward by many generations.

Communal buffalo hunting was not only a means of survival, but a practice that allowed for the building of community amongst the people of the Plains. Within Plains culture, they travelled and surveyed the landscape in smaller groups as a way of survival. When a mass buffalo hunting took place, it allowed for the social needs within these groups to be met. These killings brought forth healing within relationships, allowed the people to make trade deals, and gave the time for marriages to be arranged. In the light of friends and family being reunited, they held great ceremonies, offered up prayers, and sang many songs.

This killing site is well-known for its exclusive and useful structure. Head-Smashed-In is located twenty kilometres west of Fort-Macleod in what is known as the Porcupine Hills. These hills that stretch for almost one hundred kilometres are the remainder of a landscape that was once fully level. This erosional remnant made the perfect living space for bison, and an even more ideal hunting ground for the aboriginal people. The unique topography of the hills allowed for the aboriginal people to spy on, and prey after the bison in a discreet way. While the bison roamed throughout the dips of the hills, the hunters watched closely from the grassy hillsides. The hunters were able to follow the herds around within being noticed, which gave the hunters

the opportunity to push them further towards the cliff. According to the text, it is estimated that the cliff was twenty metres high at the time that the buffalo hunting took place. Due to the rise of the bench of the apron against the cliff over time, the cliff is now ten metres tall. The author states that over one hundred thousand buffalo have been killed at this location.

The traditional story of how the site got its rare name is has been handed down by several generations through the Pikani elders. The story began when a young man expressed interest in watching the great killing unfold. In order to watch the buffalo fall, he positioned himself below the cliff. As the hunt came to an end, the people found the young man squashed into the cliff with his head smashed in. This story has been carried forward by the Blackfoot elders has inspired the name of the historic buffalo killing site. A great European explorer, Peter Fidler, travelled through Alberta between 1700-1800. During his stay, he obtained a map of the western Plains that was drawn for him by the native people. This was one of the first maps to point out the exact location of the buffalo jump. One hundred years later a Canadian pioneer geologist was travelling through the same area, and he left informative maps and recordings of the buffalo jumps. The author argues that “there is no doubt that these two travellers recorded a buffalo jump with a name much like the one we now know as Head-Smashed-In.” (25)

This buffalo jump is not just an ordinary landmark that brings tourists from near and far. Rather, this extraordinary site holds a traditional story that has unfolded from its unique land structure and ability to gather the people together. This legendary site has and will continue to fill many minds with wonder and awe.

Questions:

How were the documents found from the European and Canadian travellers?
How did the groups equally disperse of the animals amongst themselves?

