

The North American Bison (Buffalo) & its Relationship to American Indians

I. Curricular Areas:

Social Studies/History
Geography
Language Arts
Science

II. Learner Goal:

The students will understand the buffalo and its relationship with American Indian people, with emphasis on culture, extinction and change.

III. Learner Outcomes:

Students will be able to:

1. List the many uses of, and the dependence on the buffalo by American Indian people.
2. Discuss the reasons behind the systematic destruction of the buffalo
3. Discuss the reasons that the buffalo's habitat, the prairie was destroyed.
4. Discuss what efforts are being made to save the buffalo.

IV. Teacher/Student Background Information: (from www.itbc.com)

The American Indian and the Buffalo Nation

The buffalo was/is an important part of many American Indian cultures. They consider the buffalo as their relatives. This is because the buffalo gave many gifts such as food, shelter, clothing, medicine, and tools.

The animal was honored in songs, dances, and prayers. American Indians prayed everyday to the Buffalo Nation to ask them to watch over their people and continue to help them survive. If a dancer wore a buffalo headdress or imitated a buffalo in dance, this was one way of honoring the buffalo. The skull of the buffalo was used in ceremonies. Many other buffalo parts were used to make sacred items.

American Indians hunted the buffalo by using buffalo jumps and a bow and arrow (by foot and later on horseback) Buffalo were chased until they ran over a cliff, which was called a buffalo jump. By using horses to help with hunting, they were able to keep up with the fast running speeds of buffalo. Buffalo were usually hunted after they drank water because they couldn't run as fast.

After the hunt, American Indians gave thanks to the Buffalo Nation for sacrificing one of their own for them. A feast was held to honor the hunters and the Buffalo Nation.

"The Indian was frugal in the midst of plenty," a quote by Luther Standing Bear, a Lakota man. "When the buffalo roamed the plains in multitudes, he slaughtered only what he could eat and these he used to the

hair and bones.”

“ The Buffalo was part of us, his flesh and blood being absorbed by us until it became our own flesh and blood. Our clothing, our tipis, everything we needed for life came from the buffalo’s body. It was hard to say where the animals ended and the human began.” -John(Fire) Lame Deer, Oglala- Lame Deer Seeker of Visions, with Richard Erdoes, 1972

The Slaughter of the Buffalo

The massive slaughter of the buffalo in the 1800's worked to disconnect the animal from American Indians. This had a substantial impact on American Indian people, physically as well as spiritually, emotionally, and mentally.

As more settlers began coming into North America, conflicts arose between them and the American Indians. Settlers and the US government wanted to take over their land, the American Indian did not want to give it up. The Government saw the American Indian’s strong relationship with the buffalo. They figures that if they killed the buffalo, the American Indians would have no other choice but to surrender their lands and become a “civilized people.” The military was ordered to kill the buffalo to deny American Indians food .. Soon professional hunters were hired to do the job more quickly.

The railroads were also instrumental in the slaughter of the buffalo. First buffalo were killed for food during the building of the railroads. After they were built, buffalo were killed for safety reasons. The buffalo were in the way and sometimes pushed trains off the tracks.

Due to these and many more reasons, an estimated 31 million buffalo were killed between the years of 1868 and 1881 with only 500 buffalo left by the year 1885.

By the end of the 19th Century, the American Indian population was only 237,000 down from over a million a century earlier.

Save the Buffalo

Through the work of some conservationists, the Federal government and private herd owners, efforts to save the buffalo began. After the slaughter, the last wild buffalo herd living in the U.S. made its home in Yellowstone National Park in Montana. To help preserve those few remaining buffalo, Congress passed a law making it illegal to shoot buffalo in Yellowstone. Several buffalo were also bought from private herds to increase the Yellowstone herd numbers. Another effort began in 1905 with the start of the American Bison Society formed by President Theodore Roosevelt. Through donations and support of the American Bison Society, the National Bison Range was set up on about 20,000 acres of land in Montana. In the beginning it held 39 bison, and in 1999, it held 350. These early efforts were instrumental in bringing more buffalo back to the U.S. and to Indian Country.

V. Activities

Activity One: Geography

Prior to European settlement, more than 18 million acres of prairie covered what is now Minnesota. Our prairie lands were part of the largest ecosystem in North America, which stretched from Canada to Mexico and from the Rockies to Indiana. A wealth of diverse species, habitats and cultures thrived here including the buffalo. Today, less than one percent of Minnesota native prairies remain.

Identify the Great Plains(prairie) region of North American.

List the many American Indian Nations that called the Great Plains their home.

Look at the Minnesota Map, what part of the state would be habitat for buffalo?

How much of original prairie is left in Minnesota?

Activity Two: History/Social Studies

The following are essential questions for classroom discussion.

1. What is culture? How did the buffalo shape plains American Indian culture?
2. What relationship did the buffalo have with plains American Indians?
3. How did the near extinction of the buffalo affect the plains American Indian?
4. What political, economic, and social problems arose for the plains American Indian from the slaughter of the buffalo herds?
5. What happens when cultures collide?
6. How has the life of the plains American Indian changed and how might it change in the future?
7. How has the life of the buffalo changed and how might it change in the future?

Activity Three: Science

In your packet you will find a chart detailing the significant uses of the buffalo by American Indians.

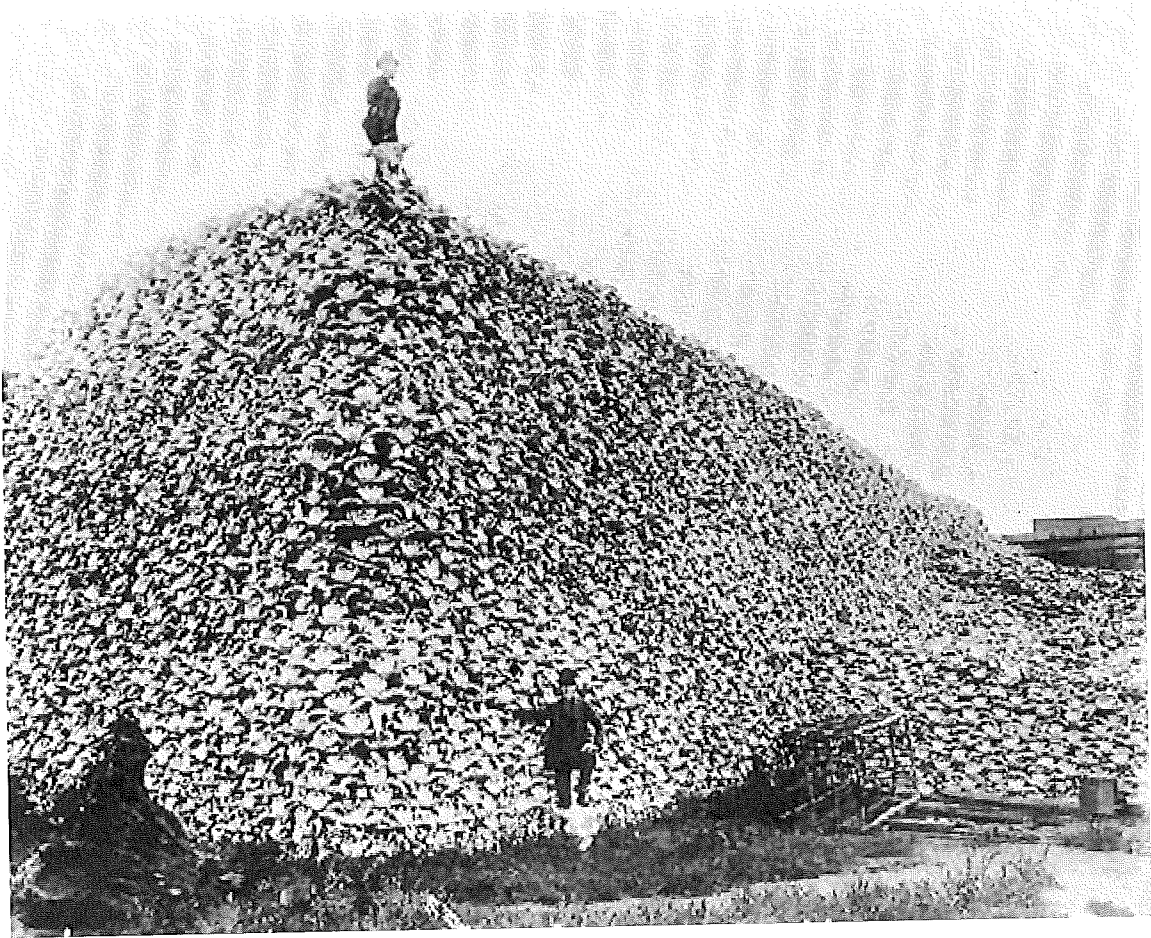
Using research skills (with guidance) find pictured examples of these products.

Compare this list with what students use today for the same purpose.

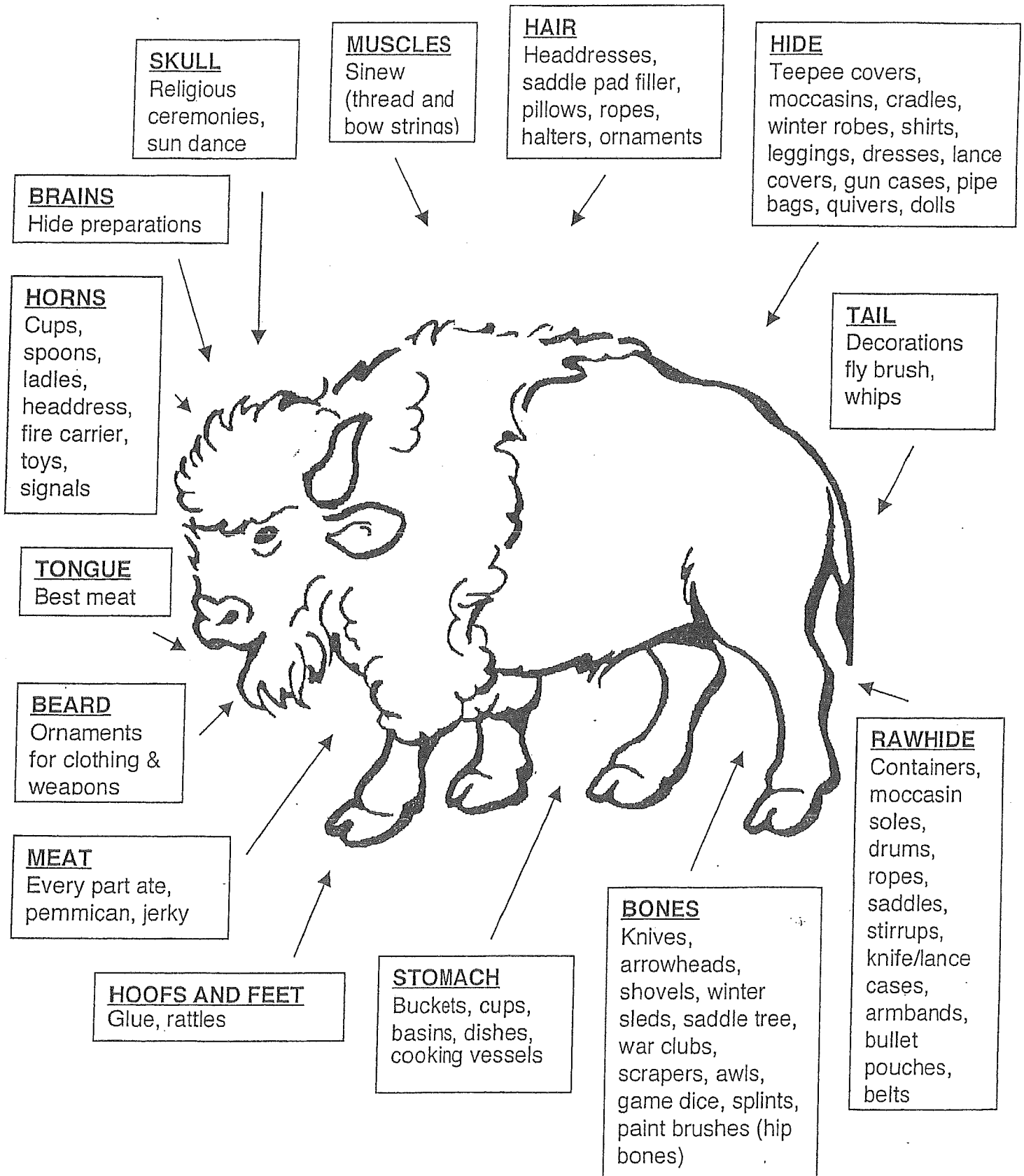
You can discuss this “compare and contrast” with your students.

Activity Four: Language Arts

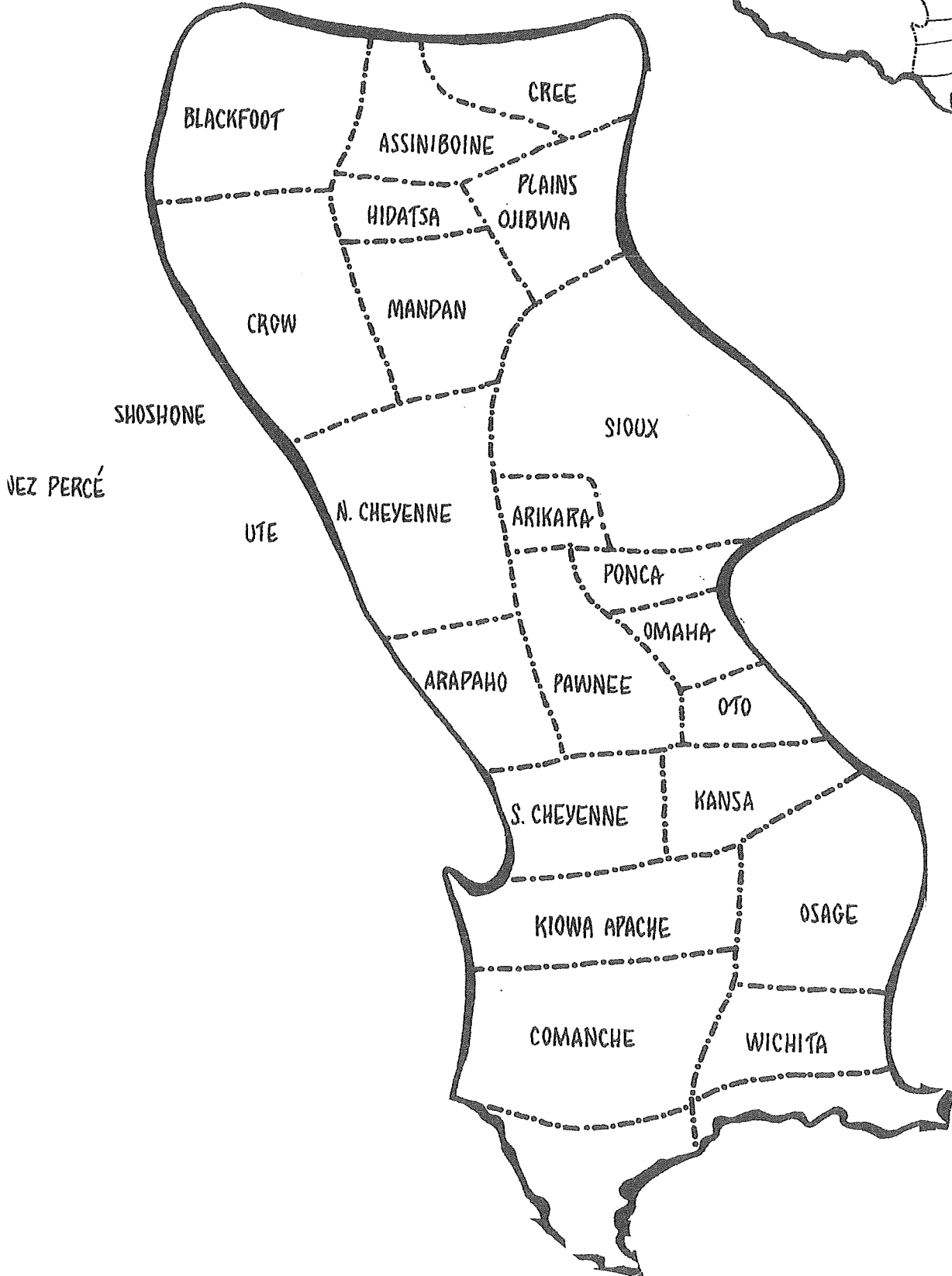
Have your students read one of the Traditional stories. Have your student's journal what the story taught them.



SIGNIFICANT USES OF THE BUFFALO

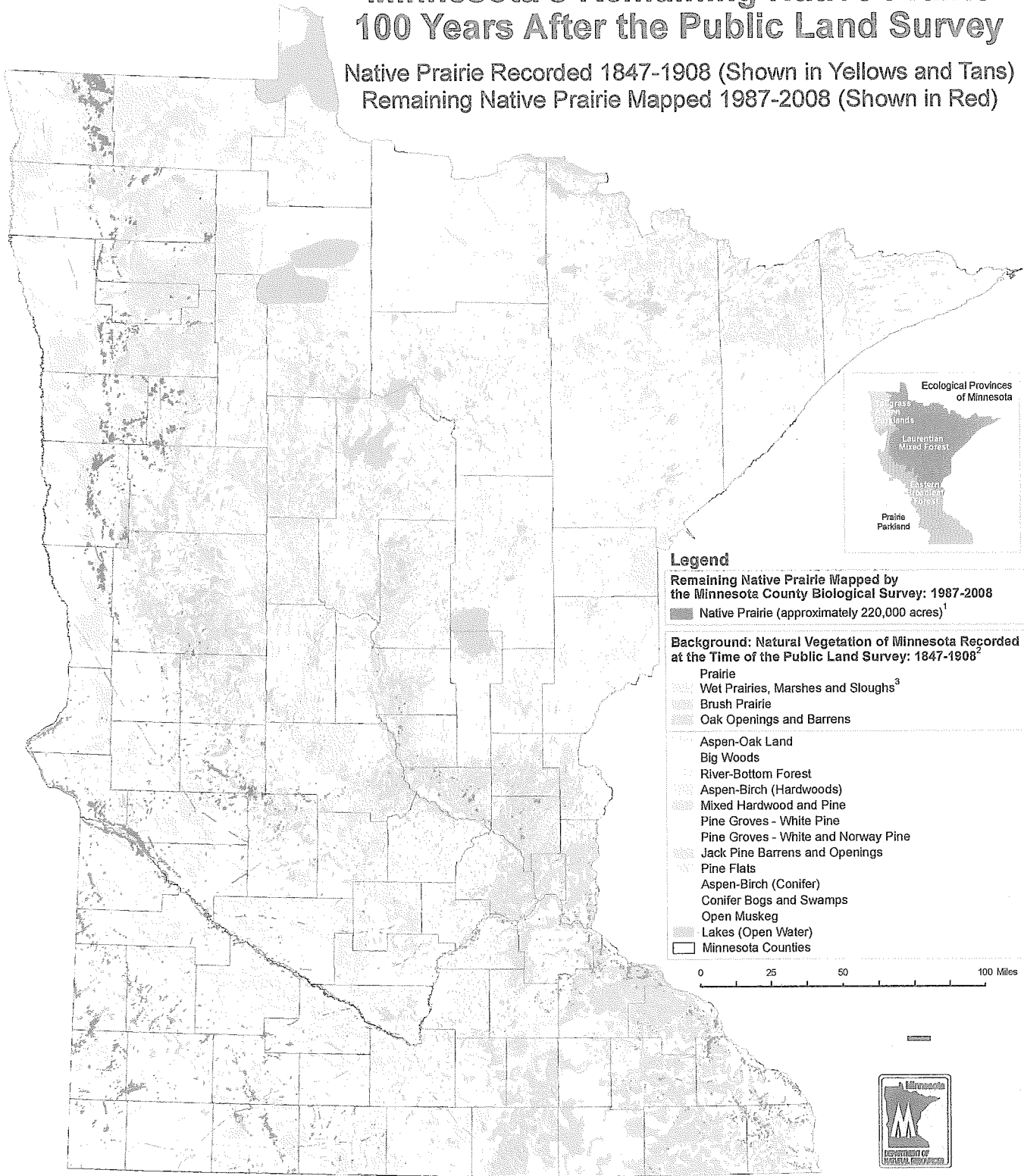


The Great Plains of North America



Minnesota's Remaining Native Prairie 100 Years After the Public Land Survey

Native Prairie Recorded 1847-1908 (Shown in Yellows and Tans)
Remaining Native Prairie Mapped 1987-2008 (Shown in Red)



Prairies mapped by the Minnesota County Biological Survey (MCBS) as of November, 2009. Some of the prairies represented on this map may have been destroyed since the time of their documentation by MCBS. Mapping of native prairies by MCBS is in progress in the following counties and will be completed by 2010: Dodge, Faribault, Freeborn, Mower, Nobles, Roseau, Steele, Waseca, and Watonwan.

¹Adapted from Marschner, F.J. 1974. *The original vegetation of Minnesota, compiled from U.S. General Land Office Survey notes* [map]. 1:500,000. Redrafted from the 1930 original by P.J. Burwell and S.J. Haas under the direction of M.L. Heinzelman. St. Paul: North Central Forest Experiment Station, United States Department of Agriculture.

²In the Laurentian Mixed Forest Province, this category mainly comprises marshes and sloughs. If wet prairies were present in the province, they were uncommon and likely restricted to western and southern regions bordering the Tallgrass Aspen Parklands and Eastern Broadleaf Forest provinces.

³GIS data for many of the native prairies depicted on this map are available in shapefile format as "MCBS Native Plant Communities" and "MCBS Railroad Rights-of-Way Prairies" on the DNR's data dell at <http://dell.dnr.state.mn.us/index.html>. Information on MCBS procedures for mapping Minnesota's prairies and other native plant communities is available at <http://www.dnr.state.mn.us/eco/mcbs/index.html>.

Map is also available online at: http://files.dnr.state.mn.us/eco/mcbs/prairie_mmap.pdf