

**“Victuals to Put into our Mouths”:  
Environmental Perspectives on Fur Trade Provisioning  
Activities at Cumberland House, 1775-1782**

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ABSTRACT. Quantitative analysis of post journals helps illuminate features of a changing provisioning trade at Cumberland House, the Hudson's Bay Company's inland post on the Saskatchewan River. Rabbits, pheasants, moose, fish and wildfowl were available only in season and were periodically affected by natural population cycles. The post widened its provisioning hinterland because local moose populations, as indexed in "green" or fresh meat, were often unavailable to traders and hunter Indians. Post employees, then, welcomed and traded meat from ever more distant hunting grounds. By 1781, Cumberland House's provisioning hinterland had increased dramatically, finally tapping into distant buffalo grounds and even Beaver Indian hunting territory. At that point, dried buffalo possibly constituted a greater proportion of the fur trader's diet. This study brings a methodological framework for further quantitative study of the fur trade, its commercial viability, and such issues as the Indians' role in depleting game resources.

SOMMAIRE. Une analyse quantitative des journaux met en relief les changements intervenus dans le ravitaillement à Cumberland House, le comptoir de la Compagnie de la Baie d'Hudson situé sur la Saskatchewan. Lapins, faisans, originaux, poisson et gibier à plume n'étaient disponibles qu'en saison et variaient avec les cycles de population naturels. Le comptoir dut élargir son champ de ravitaillement car la population d'originaux locale, cataloguée "viande fraîche", était souvent hors de la portée des marchands et des chasseurs indiens. Les employés se ravitaillèrent donc en viande provenant de terrains de chasse de plus en plus éloignés. En 1781 ce territoire se trouva énormément accru, exploitant les terrains à bison et jusqu'aux territoires de chasse des Indiens Beaver. La viande de bison séchée constituait sans doute alors la plus grande partie de l'alimentation des marchands de fourrures. Cet article apporte une méthodologie aux futures études quantitatives sur le commerce des fourrures, sur sa viabilité, et sur des questions telles que le rôle des Indiens dans l'appauvrissement des ressources en gibier.

This article appraises provisioning activities at the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) post, Cumberland House, between 1775 and 1782. By analyzing the post's initial eight years of operation, it offers a quantitative assessment of the nature of provisioning in the North American fur trade. While historians, ethnologists and geographers have noted the important roles Indians played in providing country food to posts and have identified specialization among some provisioners like the Assiniboine and Cree,<sup>1</sup> few studies have fully assessed the extent of these activities, the size of provisioning

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1 Ray identifies the seasonally changing roles of these groups: Arthur J. Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade: Their Roles as Trappers, Hunters and Middlemen in the Lands Southwest of Hudson Bay, 1660-1870* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974.) Ray also addresses the importance of Great Plains provisioning in the expansion of the fur trade: Arthur J. Ray, "The Northern Great Plains: Pantry of the Northwestern Fur Trade, 1774-1885," *Prairie Forum* 9, no. 2 (Fall 1984): 263-80. Morantz has pointed out post employees' dependency on home guard goose and "deer" hunters: Toby Morantz, *An Ethnohistoric Study of Eastern James Bay Cree Social Organization, 1700-1850*, National Museum of Man Mercury Series, Paper No. 88 (Ottawa: Canadian Ethnology Service, 1983). See also Dale Russell, "The Effects of the Spring Goose Hunt on the Crees in the Vicinity of York Factory and Churchill River in the 1700s," National Museum of Man Mercury Series, Paper No. 28, *Proceedings of the Second Congress, Canadian Ethnology Service*, Vol. 2: 420-32 (Ottawa: National Museums of Canada, 1975).

hinterlands, and other factors such as resource exhaustion that might have influenced the “victualling” of individual posts.

This shortfall in the historiography of the fur trade deserves more attention. An examination of several nineteenth-century post journals<sup>2</sup> reveals that posts often traded more for food than furs. As well as buying provisions from visiting or home guard Indians, many employees daily maintained gardens, fished, mended nets, hunted, and — in season — left their posts to live and hunt with Indians. The numbers of post employees dedicated to foraging activities represented a formidable operating cost for the HBC and other fur trading companies.

A quantitative analysis of Cumberland House’s provisioning activities sheds further light on these features of post life. It also raises questions about a number of assumptions regarding Indian hunting behaviour during the fur trade, behaviour linked to resource depletion. A culmination of ruthless competition between rival trading companies and traders’ long-term meat requirements is believed to have caused Indians to deplete the beaver and game resources of northern Ontario, central and southern Manitoba, and Saskatchewan by 1821.<sup>3</sup> To explain this apparently destructive behaviour, scholars have suggested that an ecological “disequilibrium” was achieved — that Indians fell out of traditional, harmonious relationships with nature into *unnatural* trapping and provisioning — or that economic profit motives existed and shaped Indian activities.<sup>4</sup> Our present understandings of such issues might benefit from a fuller historical analysis

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2 This study draws upon a number of late eighteenth and nineteenth century journals including: George Simpson, *Journal of Occurrences in the Athabasca Department, 1820 and 1821* (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1838); Frederick Merk, ed., *Fur Trade and Empire: George Simpson’s Journal* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931); Glenbow Archives (hereafter GA), M941, Diary of Murdoch McPherson, 1834; GA, M272, Fort Resolution Post Journal, 1861; GA, M889, Qu’Appelle Lake Post Journal, 1857-1858; GA, M165, McLeod’s Lake Post Journal, 1845-48; *Fort Pelly Journal*, 1863 (Regina: Regina Archeological Society, 1987); Duncan M’Gillivrey, *The Journal of Duncan M’Gillivrey of the North West Co. at Fort George ... 1794-5* (Toronto: Macmillan Co., 1924); A.N. McLeod’s Journal, Fort Alexandria, 1799, in Charles Gates (ed.), *Five Fur Traders of the Northwest: Being the Narrative of Peter Pond and the Diaries of John Macdonnell, Archibald N. McLeod, Hugh Faries, and Thomas Connor* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1933).

3 See Arthur J. Ray, “Some Conservation Schemes of the Hudson’s Bay Company, 1821-50: An Examination of the Problems of Resource Management in the Fur Trade,” *Journal of Economic History* 1, no. 1 (1975): 49-68. Charles Bishop examines the depletion of ungulates leading to changes in social organization among Northern Ojibwa: Charles A. Bishop, *The Northern Ojibwa and the Fur Trade: An Historical and Ecological Study* (Toronto: Holt Rineholt and Winston, 1974).

4 For ecological perspectives, see Rene R. Gadacz, “Montagnais Hunting Dynamics in Historicoecological Perspective,” *Anthropologica* 17, no. 2 (1975): 149-68; David V. Burley, “Proto-Historic Ecological Effects of the Fur Trade in Micmac Culture in Northeastern New Brunswick,” *Ethnohistory* 28, no. 3 (1981): 203-16. Martin presented crises in religious cosmology as another motivation: Calvin Martin, *Keepers of the Game: Indian-Animal Relationships and the Fur Trade* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).

of the hunting effort required to deplete forests and watersheds,<sup>5</sup> and of the extent to which Indians significantly altered their seasonal activities to participate in the trade. Furthermore, food shortages periodically marking post life, raising the price of provisions, slowing the trade and threatening the existence of Indian and trader alike, can find a meaningful and informative context within a local environment and ecological setting.<sup>6</sup>

Cumberland House journals show that post employees collected their provisions seasonally and often according to wildlife population cycles. Periodic food shortages which became apparent almost immediately after the post was constructed can be attributed to the local environment and the post's social organization. Cumberland employees, after all, were members of a semisedentary society. They were required to seek alternative provisions when nearby meat resources could not sustain their needs. At Cumberland House, food scarcities forced employees to specialize in fishing and widen the post's provisioning hinterlands. In short, they changed their eating habits and got their food from farther afield. These changes can be recognized in a quantitative analysis of post journals over an eight-year period, when employees periodically consumed less fresh, or "green," meat and replaced it in their diets by eating more dried meat from ever more distant hunting grounds. Records are not explicit, but the buffalo seems to have played an increasingly important dietary role at Cumberland House by 1782.

This assessment has wider implications for fur trade studies. From its beginnings the trade clearly was burdened with a costly and onerous provisioning challenge that not only affected post life, but determined some of the post's interaction with Indians and tested some of the commercial viability of the fur trade itself.<sup>7</sup>

Cumberland House was established in 1774, the first HBC post on the Saskatchewan River. The company had sent Samuel Hearne to establish the house in response to the prior incursions and effective competition of Montreal pedlars.<sup>8</sup> Constructed in 1775 on Pine Lake in present-day

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5 Carlos and Lewis' work applies carrying capacity estimates within their quantitative analysis of beaver harvests: Ann M. Carlos and Frank D. Lewis, "Indians, the Beaver and the Bay: The Economics of Depletions in the Lands of the Hudson's Bay Company, 1700-1763," *Journal of Economic History* 53, no. 3 (1993): 465-94.

6 Some of the complex issues related to starvation reports are addressed by Mary Black-Rogers, "Varieties of 'Starving': Semantics and Survival in the Subarctic Fur Trade, 1750-1850," *Ethnohistory* 33, no. 4 (1986): 353-83.

7 Arthur J. Ray, "Periodic Shortages, Native Welfare, and the Hudson's Bay Company, 1670-1930," in Shepard Krech III, ed., *The Subarctic Fur Trade: Native Social and Economic Adaptations* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1984), 1-19.

8 See E.E. Rich's Introduction to the post journals: E.E. Rich, ed., *Cumberland and Hudson House Journals 1775-1782*, 2 vols. (London: The Hudson's Bay Record Society, 1951), hereafter, *Cumberland*.

Saskatchewan, the trading post constituted the furthest step inland by the company after its construction of Henley House on the Albany River. It also marked the beginnings of an intensive trade rivalry between Canadian traders and the HBC that would extend along the North Saskatchewan and up the Athabasca Rivers. This trade rivalry resulted in the building of more posts and the placement inland of more men. It also increased food requirements.<sup>9</sup> Transporting provisions to the interior — corn, wild rice, oatmeal and flour — constituted a staggering expense, as did buying food from Indians. Alexander Henry the Younger's reference to "the vast quantity of provision we require yearly to carry on the trade in the northwest," included not only the thousands of pounds of meat required at posts, but the massive quantities vital for the success of canoe brigades going in and out of trading areas.<sup>10</sup>

Although strategically situated to tap both western and northern fur regions,<sup>11</sup> Cumberland House was less fortunate with respect to food resources. Unlike the posts situated in "Buffalo Country," Cumberland was located in the boreal forest, between the Precambrian Shield to the north and the edge of the Great Plains to the south. Philip Turner's late eighteenth century map shows a conspicuously empty game region surrounding Cumberland House, unlike the abundant "southern Indian country" along the South and North Saskatchewan Rivers.<sup>12</sup> At Cumberland House, conifers, especially white and black spruce, were dominant. Wildlife such as moose (*Alces alces*) were fairly abundant and Pine Lake held whitefish (*Coregonus clupeaformis*), sturgeon (*Acipenser fulvescens*), pike (*Esox lucius*), and perch.<sup>13</sup>

Indians had adopted seminomadic lifestyles to compensate for an environment noted for cyclical and seasonal food availability.<sup>14</sup> A.J. Ray has studied the seasonal migrations of the Cree and Assiniboine in this light. The former inhabited woodland areas where they hunted moose and

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- 9 Ernest Voorhis, *Historic Forts and Trading Posts of the French Regime and the English Fur Trading Companies* (Ottawa: Department of Interior, 1930).
- 10 A.S. Morton cites this quotation in his introduction to M'Gillivrey's diaries, *Journal of Duncan M'Gillivrey*, viii. Henry had stated that each canoe brigade consumed four ninety-pound bags of pemmican en route to Cumberland House.
- 11 "Cumberland House Historical Park," Government of Saskatchewan Museum's Branch, 1978. Also, J.E.M. Kew, *Cumberland House in 1960*, Report No. 2. Economic and Social Survey of Northern Saskatchewan, March 1962 (Saskatoon: University of Saskatchewan, 1962).
- 12 A reproduction of Turner's map is appended to *The Journals of Samuel Hearne and Philip Turner, 1774-1792* (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1934.)
- 13 It is not clear what species of perch dominated in Pine Lake. Robins et al., provide common and scientific names for fish in Canada. C.R. Robins et al., *Common and Scientific Names of Fishes from the United States and Canada*, 5th ed. (Bethesda, MD: American Fisheries Society, 1991). Special Publication #20.
- 14 Bruce Cox, *Cultural Ecology: Readings on the Canadian Indians and Eskimos* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1973), 56.

beaver during the summer and early fall, and moved to the parkland belt during the winter. The Assiniboine spent the warmer months in the grasslands and moved into the parkland belt during winter.<sup>15</sup> This "exploitation" cycle allowed Indians to take advantage of the hunting opportunities of both environments.

Cumberland House employees did not enjoy such mobility. As a social organization the post was quite different from Native bands and the small, highly mobile groups of pedlars who operated extensively to the north, west and south of the house.<sup>16</sup> When Matthew Cocking replaced Hearne as the post's chief trader in 1775 and had to oversee the dietary requirements of fifteen employees, he immediately set out to exploit fish populations in Pine Lake, encouraged trade in provisions, and built up a meat surplus sufficient to withstand privations.<sup>17</sup> A "victualling shed" was built and a garden planted. Cocking's intention was to compensate for the sedentary nature of the post's social organization by stocking a surplus of food and exploiting nearby resources.

The strategy might have succeeded had nearby game resources not been susceptible to depletion. Country food was marked by seasonal availability and sometimes dramatic natural population cycles. Wildfowl was available only in spring and fall. Rabbits and pheasants also followed population fluctuations. Within a year of arriving at Cumberland House, Cocking heard from Indians that lynx (or "inland cats") were unavailable due to the scarcity of rabbits, this explaining why HBC men had no success snaring hares that winter and the next.<sup>18</sup> Even fish populations moved within Pine Lake according to seasonal water temperatures and oxygen levels.<sup>19</sup> Post employees set out virtually year-round with nets, but sturgeon, trout, perch and whitefish were abundant only in specific periods of the year, when schools were within reach. The catch generally fell off by January and remained poor until March.

During late winter, meat provisions began dwindling when weather conditions prevented trading Indians from travelling. While in summer and fall moose moved to watered areas where they could be hunted with relative ease and transported by canoe, by late October rivers and lake

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15 Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade*. Theodore Binnema is presently investigating related issues.

16 Cocking noted that pedlars divided themselves into groups of six men during the winter and supplied themselves with nets and ammunition. See Rich, *Cumberland* 1: 28.

17 Rich cites the gifted "patience" and skills of Orkney fishermen. "Introduction," *Cumberland* 2: liv-lv.

18 On 11 December 1775, Cocking noted that both pheasants and rabbits "were scarce, particularly Rabbets [sic]." See Rich, *Cumberland* 1: 24. By July Indians attributed a lack of "cats" to declining numbers of rabbits: see *ibid.*, 67.

19 Martin J. Paetz and Joseph S. Nelson, *The Fishes of Alberta* (Edmonton: Government of Alberta, 1970), 8-15. In 1777, post employees fished 140 days of the year; days not fishing were often spent mending nets.

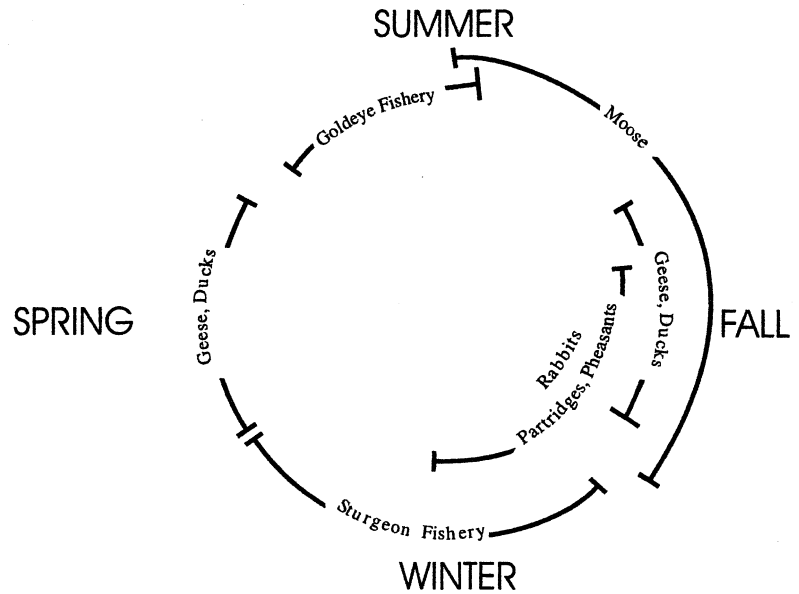


Figure 1. Major seasonal provisioning activities, Cumberland House: 1775-1782.

systems were beginning to ice over. A master learned that any significant stores of meat had to be collected by fall, “when the Buck Moose are Fat, and the Indians have the convenience of Canoes.”<sup>20</sup> By January, with northern winds howling outside and few visitors likely to arrive, house rations were often cut in half.

Traders, then, faced periodic, if not predictable provisioning constraints throughout the year. As at all trading posts, a seasonal cycle dominated the provisioning activities at Cumberland House (Figure 1).

This provisioning cycle, however, raises a number of questions. The extent to which changing game populations affected traders is not fully known. This is of critical importance when considering big game. The primary meat resource at Cumberland House was moose, still relatively abundant in the lakes region of present-day Saskatchewan and Manitoba. Indians delivered moose in a variety of forms: fresh (“green”), “beat” (Indians pounded it between rocks and sometimes added dried fish to the composite), dried and “half-dried.”<sup>21</sup> Of these, green meat was a favoured

20 Rich, *Cumberland* 1: 110.

21 Graham describes these meat preparations in *ibid.*, 1: 77n. Cocking pointed out to York Factory officials that “half-dried” meat at Cumberland was the same as “dried” meat at York; half-dried meat was further dried to better preserve it, *ibid.*, 1: 28. Ray also provides detail of these various meat productions: Arthur J. Ray, “Fur Trade Pantry,” 265.

trade commodity, especially after long periods of rationing and dried meat consumption. It fetched higher prices for trading Indians.<sup>22</sup> The extent to which forests nearby were depleted of moose over time is not known, but a close examination of the post's green meat consumption ought to show whether numbers of moose killed locally, and sold fresh for higher prices, changed over time.

An expanding provisioning hinterland might also indicate local resource exhaustion. A growing scarcity in moose might have encouraged provisioning Indians from further west to trade. If that was the case, post records ought to indicate the arrival of more Indians from distant game regions and different meat being introduced, particularly buffalo.

Quantitative analysis of the post journals helps shed light on these issues. Few of Cumberland House's account books, which would have indicated changing prices of country food, have survived.<sup>23</sup> However, the HBC Archives preserved the post's journals of daily occurrences from 1775 well into the nineteenth century. The present study analyzes the first eight years of these journals in an attempt to find the *relative* amounts, description and origins of country foods reaching the post. At the end of the period studied, Hudson House was supplying Cumberland with more quantities of provisions, notably buffalo, and the complex relationship between these two posts beyond this period requires further investigation.<sup>24</sup> The Cumberland House journals which have been analyzed nevertheless provide valuable information about the size of fish catches, the numbers of rabbits snared and partridges shot — commodities often collected by employees which, because no trade items were exchanged for them, would not appear in account ledgers. These journals offer, then, a rich source of information for estimating the total effort directed towards stocking provisions at the post as well as the volume of the food trade taking place with Indians.

Seasonal and cyclical changes in game and fish resources have been assessed by comparing monthly totals of species reaching the post and appearing in the journals' daily entries. The sturgeon, geese, swans, ducks, partridges (known also as "pheasants"), and rabbits brought back to the post were frequently enumerated explicitly. Sturgeon, unlike smaller lake fish, attracted the attention of journal writers, possibly due to the species'

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22 On 26 September 1779, William Tomison, then chief trader at Cumberland House, noted that he purchased two canoes of green meat from Indians, even though the post had sufficient fresh geese. He did so not to "affront" the trading Indians: "me haveing it dried made it some little more Expences." See Rich, *Cumberland* 2: 16.

23 Accounts appear in the post's journals for the years 1796 and 1827. The post's account books are preserved in the HBC Archives for the years 1796-1797, 1804-1805, 1810-1816, and frequently for years between 1821 and 1870.

24 See the journals of Robert Longmoore and William Tomison at Hudson House, 1778-1782, HBC Archives, B/87 a/1-5.

size which ranged from fifteen to eighty-five pounds in weight. The specific number of this type of fish, therefore, was usually well recorded.

A number of problems arise, however, in the assessment of moose and of fish other than sturgeon. Often expressions such as "a few fish," or "three canoes arrived with moose," were used by the journal writers. For purposes of comparison, meat has here been measured by the numbers of canoes bringing it to the post. The total weight of meat carried in canoes obviously varied. It was sometimes as high as 250 pounds,<sup>25</sup> often the amount of meat taken from a killed moose. Difficulties with this unit of measure are encountered in winter entries, when the few provisions arriving at the post were listed by the number of sleds or the number of Indians arriving to trade. In these cases, the study has converted two "sleds" to equal one "canoe," for the sake of comparison. Likewise, individuals occasionally arrived at the post carrying between forty-five to eighty pounds of meat.<sup>26</sup> For the purpose of these estimates, four trading individuals have here been represented as carrying the equivalent of one canoe of provisions. As for daily fish catches described as "a few," "a great success at the nets," "not much success at the nets," and "a middling success at the nets," the values of three, ten, two and five, respectively, have been assigned to these occurrences in the journals.

Many of these figures, then, will not show real quantities of food resources. Only occasionally do the post journals clearly list inventories of meat (see Figure 2).<sup>27</sup> The journals rarely list the total number of pounds of provisions traded by Indians. What has been assumed is that expressions such as "a few" were used consistently, and just as wildlife population surveys are presently conducted with margins of error, it is expected that errors will occur consistently in the survey. The survey's value, then, lies not in its ability to show the actual number of moose and fish collected, but in its ability to indicate *change* in provisioning over time.

A final note on methodology is required. Post journals were often explicit about the canoes of fresh meat arriving at the post, possibly because they brought food more costly in terms of trade goods, and also because

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25 This is likely a high estimate. More often, canoes arrived with about 150 pounds of moose — see 26 September 1777. Two canoes often arrived with 200 to 250 pounds of green moose — see 3 and 14 July 1778. Similarly, 20 September 1781, two canoes arrived with 265 pounds of green and dried meat.

26 The journals record eight Sweet Herb Lake Indians arriving with 375 pounds of meat, an average of 45 pounds per person on 8 March 1777. Four men were often sent to collect meat from a killed moose. See 23 December 1777, when four men returned with 290 pounds of moose meat, an average of 72 pounds per person. On 17 February 1778, one man and three women arrived at the post with 334 pounds of provisions, an average of 83 pounds each.

27 These should not be confused with the winter's total stock. The post went through staggering amounts of meat. For instance, on 23 January 1777, when Cocking made out that year's inventory of stock as 1,566 pounds total (represented in Figure 2), he lamented that it would last the post only thirty-seven days.



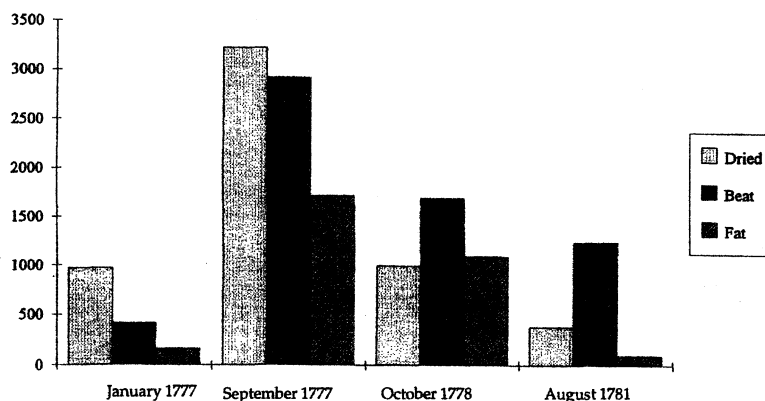


Figure 2. Inventories of provisions in Cumberland House, 1777, 1778, 1781 (in pounds).

employees preferred fresh meat to dried meat. On several occasions the expression "a canoe of provisions" was used by a journal writer to describe a cargo of green meat, its freshness identifiable only when men were assigned to smoke or dry portions of it the day after it was traded. These cargoes have been counted as "green." Furthermore, since the purpose of the green meat survey is to see nearby population cycles,<sup>28</sup> moose that were killed near the post by home guard Indians and post employees have been assumed to be green, even though portions of this meat were likely dried for future use.

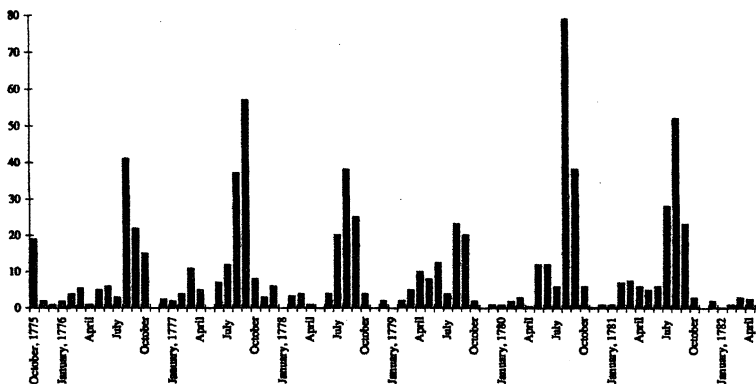


Figure 3. Meat, dry and green, reaching Cumberland House, 1775-1782 (by number of canoes).

28 The post rejected green meat brought from too great a distance or after it went bad. One canoe brought to the post meat that "had been too long kept for some part of it was running over with maggots." See Rich, *Cumberland* 2: 109. On 7 July 1777, a canoe carried "tainted" moose and was refused.

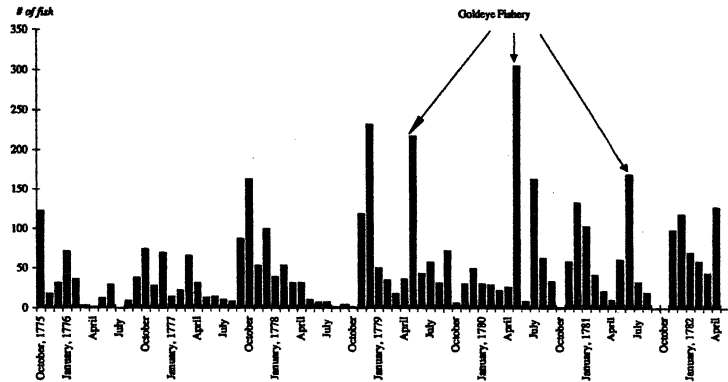


Figure 4. Fish, all species, Cumberland House, 1775-1782.

The post journals show that the total amount of meat arriving at Cumberland House varied according to the season. Canoes of provisions arrived in greatest frequency in August and September, while much smaller numbers of canoes reached the post in May (Figure 3). The meat trade ended abruptly in October, when rivers and streams finally froze over and Indians could bring only small amounts of meat by sled. Chief trader Cocking was quite surprised by the arrival in March 1777 of four Sweet Herb Lake Indians with a "trifle" of provisions, but "according to their Number [they had brought] much more Provisions than I could have expected at this Time of the Year such a Distance."<sup>29</sup> Fish (Figures 4 and 5), wildfowl (Figure 6), partridges and rabbits (Figures 7 and 8), meanwhile, display an availability

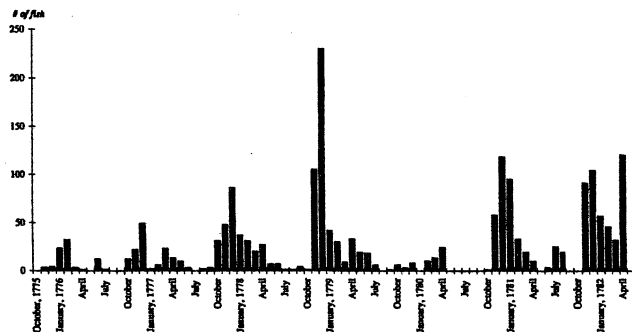


Figure 5. Sturgeon Fishery, Cumberland House, 1775-1782.

<sup>29</sup> Cocking to Marten, 8 March 1777, Rich, *Cumberland* 1: 126-27.

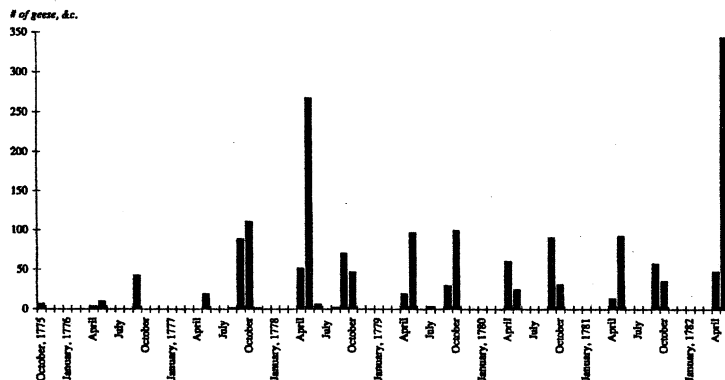


Figure 6. Geese, ducks and swans, Cumberland House, 1775-1782.

in specific seasons of the year. The figures also display peaks and lows in natural population cycles: for instance, an abundant year for pheasants is clearly discernible in 1780, while rabbits were reaching their cyclical peak in 1778.

William Cocking adapted his post's sedentary organization to such seasonal and cyclical population changes in a number of ways. In October of the first year inland Cocking sent William Walker, one of the post's employees, to winter with Indians at Cranberry Portage, "to be supported" by the Indians and aid in hunting. In late December, Walker returned with two sleds of moose and beaver flesh.<sup>30</sup> Sending post employees away "to be

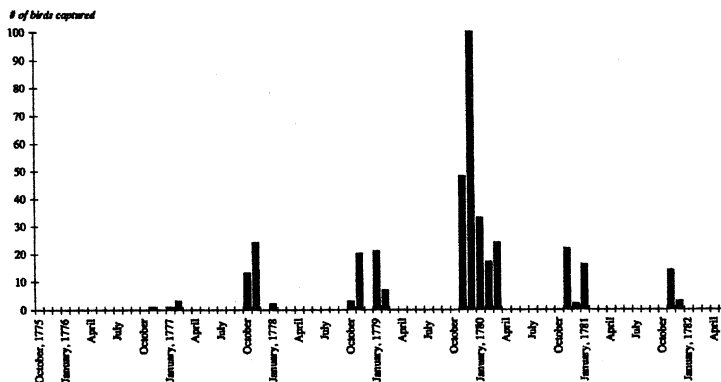


Figure 7. Total "pheasants" and "partridges," Cumberland House, 1775-1782.

30 18 October 1775, 22 December 1775. See Rich, *Cumberland* 1.

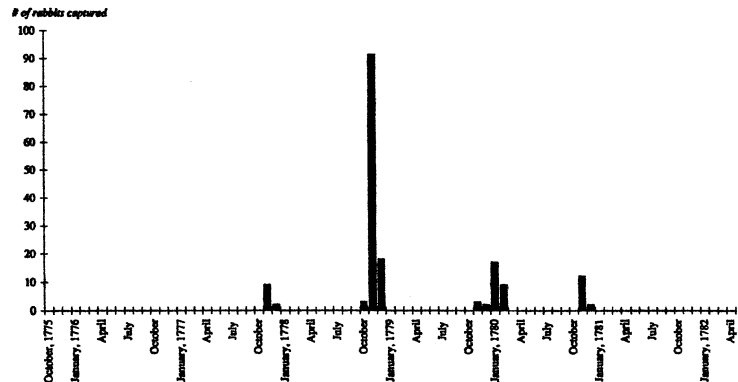


Figure 8. Rabbits captured at Cumberland House, 1775-1782.

supported" became a common strategy, especially when nets were falling off by January and provisions were scant. In those cold, hungry months in 1779, for instance, Nicholas Wishart was sent "away with Indians to be supported" and to "assist in bringing in provisions, when they may kill a moose."<sup>31</sup>

The post also drew provisions from home guard "hunter" Indians living nearby in camps. Some provided considerable food for the post, such as one unnamed individual described by Cocking as "the only Indian that has continued by us this Winter" and who supplied the post with 740 pounds of fresh moose meat.<sup>32</sup> Often encamped nearby in the late summer to trade

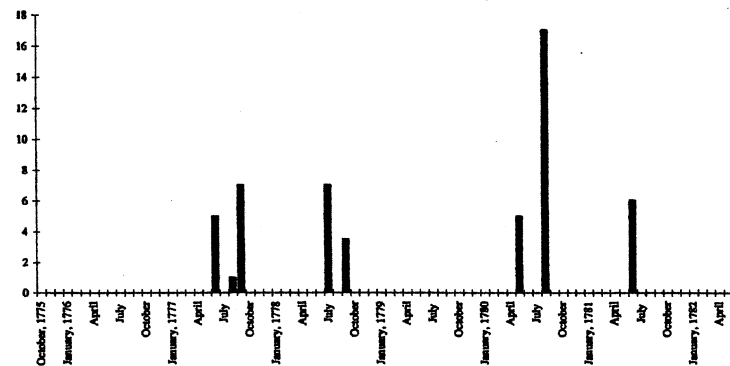


Figure 9. Buffalo provisions reported, Cumberland House, 1775-1782.

31 Ibid., 18 February 1779.

32 Ibid., 1: 214.

furs, some Indians were persuaded to stay on to hunt geese and, later, meat for the post in the winter. From their "wooder" camps, these hunters often sent for rum and ammunition, and shared portions of their animal kills with the post.

The limited returns of this local hunting, however, are apparent in the journals. The Basquio Indians who stayed on during the first winter to hunt for the post complained that "no moose are about,"<sup>33</sup> echoing the hunter Indians in 1778 who pointed out that there were "no moose stirring" in local forests.<sup>34</sup> Even when a hunter occasionally killed a moose that provided upwards of 300 pounds of meat, given the number of mouths to feed, one moose could be expected to serve only eight days of provisions.<sup>35</sup>

During inevitable periods of scarcity, post masters reduced rations accordingly and saw to it that food remained well preserved in the victualing shed. The shed itself was frequently upgraded, rotting floors replaced and provisions frequently "turned."

But always supplementing the pantry at Cumberland House was its "everlasting resource of fish."<sup>36</sup> It is apparent that the post modified both its fishing technology and technique in the face of meat shortages. At first, the post's fishermen used regular fishing twine, susceptible to damage, for their sturgeon nets. In fact, for every day that nets were being used, another was often spent repairing them. By 1777, the post had acquired "Italian" twine that proved better for sturgeon but tended to swell in the water. Jack twine, too rigid for the smaller species of fish, was eventually used exclusively for sturgeon. Together with these technological improvements, post fishermen adapted their techniques. Journals are not explicit but it seems that fishermen no longer fished at random in Pine Lake: they chose proven locations and netted individual species. The expression "sturgeon nets" was used more frequently after 1780, almost always in reference to the fishing taking place in late November and December; fishermen by then had found locations under the ice favourable to that species. Cocking, meanwhile, often sent men upriver to specific locations, and by 1779 the post had obviously discovered local runs of goldeye, with spring catches sometimes numbering eighty to ninety fish per day. By the third year, whitefish were netted more consistently in November.

The best evidence of changing technique can be seen in a significantly improved sturgeon fishery. As Figure 5 indicates, December 1778 was a record year for sturgeon, with some 225 fish netted that month alone. Although the following seasons declined, all winters after 1777 had more

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33 Ibid., 7 April 1776.

34 Ibid., 13 October 1778.

35 Cocking allotted 2.5 pounds of meat per man, in a post of fifteen men.

36 Rich, *Cumberland* 1: 67.

efficient fishing than the winters of 1775 and 1776. Indeed, in the early years most references to the fishery state that two or three sturgeon had been netted daily during favourable seasons — whereas, by 1781, fishermen were netting between ten and thirty per day. This was probably due to increased knowledge of the habits of these fish under the ice and to the introduction of deeper-sunk nets.

However, the post's men required more than fish. Desperate for meat to survive the winter, employees often traded significant quantities of goods, especially liquor and tobacco, to provisioning Indians and occasionally cut off the fur trade altogether to purchase food instead.<sup>37</sup> Even with these efforts, food was rarely abundant. In 1778, the post diarist noted that hunters were having no luck finding game, and “our whole dependence must be now intirely [*sic*] on a few Buffalo Indians who used to come down in the fall.”<sup>38</sup> The next year, the post journal lamented the few provisions reaching the post; in August, the writer pointed out that “if it had not been for netting a few fish, we should not have had a mouthful to have puten in our mouths.”<sup>39</sup> Between September 1779 and January 1780, the post received almost no green meat stores, except for partridges and one deer.<sup>40</sup> Finally, in 1782, William Tomison, then in charge of Cumberland House, noted that he had never seen such scarcity. That winter he had seen no more than six sides of moose; rabbits and partridges were scarce; and fish were not “plentiful.”<sup>41</sup>

Such scarcity likely had many causes. Smallpox struck Indians around Cumberland and its outpost, Hudson House, in 1781, severely reducing the furs brought in by these disease-stricken people. Provisioning also dropped: strong competition from the pedlars also meant that provisions were often traded before they reached Cumberland.<sup>42</sup>

Whatever the causes for such scarcity, Figure 11 shows that green meat stores rose and fell dramatically. Rather than suggesting that local game populations were being depleted, the figure communicates a number of possibilities: that nearby moose underwent cyclical population change, or

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37 In August 1778, Cocking could not trade five canoes of furs because “my stock [of liquor] is so small I am obliged to preserve it for Provisions, for as yet I have but small stock considering the season of the year.” See *ibid.*, 19 August 1777.

38 *Ibid.*, 1: 255.

39 *Ibid.*, 2: 9.

40 *Ibid.*, 2: 27.

41 *Ibid.*, 2: 136.

42 Robert Longmoore wrote Cocking in 1779 from Hudson House, stating that “the Canadians are now so numerous that many are left inland, all the summer. These buy up all the food they can and hinder the Indians from carrying furs or food to your settlement.” See Longmoore’s *Journal*, Rich, *Cumberland* 1: 309. In 1779, Cocking noted that Le Pas Indians often promised to return with green meat, “but they having so many houses to go to they like to be near and there and everywhere.” *Ibid.*, 2: 29.

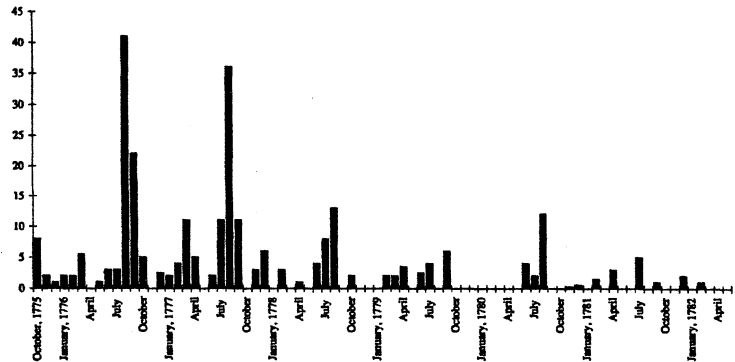


Figure 10. Declining "moose" provisions, Cumberland House, 1775-1782.

that local Indians and home guard "hunters" experienced variable success in finding moose. A third possibility is that local Indians participated inconsistently in the provisioning trade, took their goods elsewhere, or had little surplus to trade with the HBC. The important implication of Figure 11, however, is that moose seem to have been periodically available to the post, and periodically *unavailable*. The winter of 1776, for instance, had the greatest scarcity of fresh meat, while in 1777 the post enjoyed almost thirty canoes of green meat before a downward trend reached another low in 1779. At that point it is possible that moose populations in nearby forests began building up numbers by 1780, or else Indians began participating in the trade more frequently. A growth in the green meat trade can be discernible until 1782, when the numbers of canoes carrying fresh provisions dropped drastically once more.

Figure 10 suggests that moose were not available consistently and for that reason Cocking frequently encouraged Indians from further away to

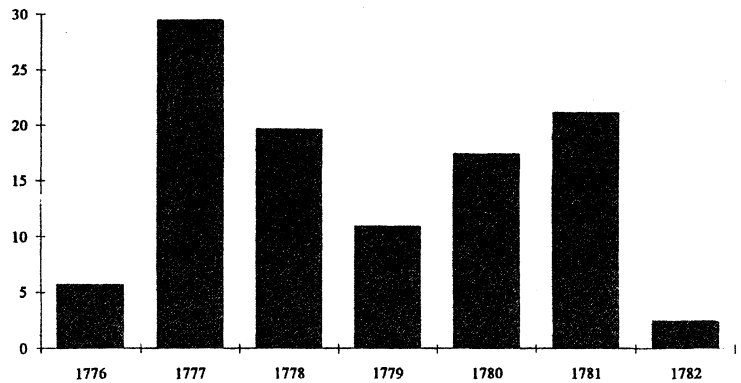


Figure 11. Canoes of "green" meat supplying Cumberland House, 1776 to May 1782.

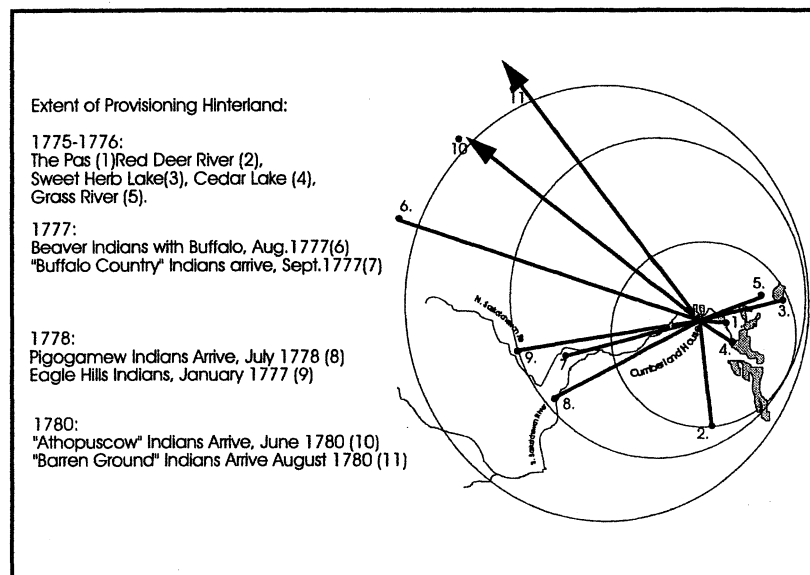


Figure 12. An expanding provisioning hinterland, Cumberland House, 1775-1782.

furnish the post with provisions. Initially the post journals record provisioners from The Pas, Red Deer River, Sweet Herb Lake, Cedar Lake and Grass River, all of whom probably supplied moose (see Figure 12). Evidently this provisioning hinterland was not great enough. In 1777 Cocking encouraged a Sweet Herb Lake Indian to bring provisions, and expressed the hope "that these [people] he came from or any others that he might meet with, would be diligent in Collecting Provisions and bring in Here."<sup>43</sup>

Cocking's call for Indian provisions was evidently answered. Although small groups of Pigogamew,<sup>44</sup> Beaver, and Eagle Hills Indians arrived in 1775, by 1777 many more Indians were bringing food from much further afield. In 1778 and 1780 they arrived in impressive numbers. In late June 1781, six canoes of "Athopuskow" Indians arrived, likely from Lake Athabasca, a few days before the arrival of eight canoes from the "Barren Grounds," possibly Chipewyan or Plains Indians. These groups, it should be pointed out, arrived with both provisions and furs. When sixteen canoes from the "Barren Grounds" arrived in late August "with provisions," what seems to be a significantly widened provisioning hinterland was in place, connecting Cumberland House to Lake Athabasca, Beaver Indian territory,

43 Ibid., 1: 129.

44 Many of the names for Indians are identified in the synonymy section of "Western Woods Cree," *Handbook of North American Indians*, Vol. 6: *Subarctic* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1981). My thanks to John Foster for pointing out that "Beaver" may have been Sarcee from the Elk Island area, and "Eagle Hills," possibly Blackfoot. "Barren Grounds" Indians might refer to prairie Indians.



and the buffalo grounds along the North and South Saskatchewan Rivers where, by 1778, Assiniboine Indians were staking a monopoly in the buffalo trade.<sup>45</sup>

More provisions probably arrived from these buffalo regions as time passed. The journals first mention the pounding of buffalo by Assiniboine Indians near Alexander Henry's Upper Settlement in March 1775; little, if any, of that buffalo was brought to Cumberland House, however. Inland trading expeditions were started the following year by the post's employee, Robert Longmoore (eventually establishing Hudson House), but the distance was too great and the hands too few to bring back much buffalo meat. In 1777, Longmoore's inland expedition returned with some pemmican, although he stated that "they were obliged to eat it up" on the canoe trip back to Cumberland House.<sup>46</sup> The post's first reported trade in buffalo meat took place in September, when four canoes from "Buffalo Country" arrived. Out of nearly 6,000 pounds of dried and beat meat, the post's inventory of food lists 100 pounds of pemmican after this visit.<sup>47</sup> As Figure 9 shows, reports of buffalo provisions arriving at the post had become more commonplace by 1778; and it is likely that with the arrival of many Pigogamew, Eagle Hills and "Buffalo Country" Indians, many provisions traded were dried buffalo, without being reported as such. Figure 9 should possibly be read in light of Figure 10, which shows a decline in reports of "moose" provisions arriving at the post; what these two trends suggest is that dried buffalo and pemmican stores were replacing moose as a primary food source of the post.

This article suggests that quantitative analysis helps illuminate features of the provisioning trade at Cumberland House. The post's garden, probably an important source of food, has not been analyzed because of the scarcity of references to the amount of garden produce grown and used by the post. Emphasis has been placed on the source and availability of meat provisions and the important changes in their supply over time. Country food was subject to significant seasonal availability, as well as dramatic natural population cycles. Rabbits, pheasants, and possibly even moose, showed short-term population cycles; geese were available only in season; even fish had migratory movements that clearly determined the success of nets in specific seasons of the year.

Indians had adapted to the seasonal and cyclical constraints of country food by adopting seminomadic lifestyles. Cumberland House employees

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45 Both Canadian peddlars and HBC men at Hudson House noted that Assiniboine Indians were burning forage grass around their posts to ensure they could not hunt buffalo themselves. See Arthur Ray for more details on the Assiniboine trade in provisions and their seasonal lifestyle shared between plains and parkland belt environments.

46 Rich, *Cumberland* 1: 157-58

47 22 September 1777 in Rich, *Cumberland* 1.

engaged in a semisedentary post lifestyle and adapted in other ways: they specialized in fishing and became more efficient in sturgeon and goldeye netting through technological and technical improvement. To gain other sources of meat, the post had to ever widen its provisioning hinterland. Local moose populations, as indexed by the trade in green meat, showed inconsistent availability; even when local hunting was successful, it often could not provide the post with enough meat. The post employees, as a consequence, welcomed and traded meat from ever more distant hunting grounds. By 1781, Cumberland House's provisioning hinterland had increased dramatically, and finally tapped into distant buffalo grounds and even Beaver Indian hunting territory. By then, dried buffalo possibly constituted a greater proportion of the fur traders' diet.

At the beginning of this study, aspects of ecological and economic explanations for Indian behaviour in the fur trade were briefly discussed. Widening provisioning hinterlands have not been fully incorporated into studies of wildlife depletion and the Indian's role in over-hunting. The local environment at Cumberland House was never abundant enough to fully feed post employees; much of their food was drawn from other game areas, regions themselves likely susceptible to depletion. Some aspects of the issue of depletion, then, do not reflect destructive behaviour on the Indians' part as much as the collective effort of widely scattered Indians who had chosen on a particular year to provision distant posts. Certainly more research will identify the hinterlands which supplied posts with food after trade competition intensified. The periodic shortage of green meat also suggests that local Indians were making decisions, perhaps on a year-to-year basis, as to whether or not to supply the post with meat. Disease and pedlar competition obviously affected the quantities brought to the post, but the very fact that Indians were not bringing food to the post consistently, demanded larger provisioning hinterlands.

Possibly the most significant by-product of such a provisioning system was increased cost. Many Indians were well aware of a post's dependence on wild meat, despite York Factory's stern edict to chief traders to keep such information secret.<sup>48</sup> Indians clearly exacted higher prices when posts had few provisions. At Hudson House, Cumberland's outpost, Assiniboine Indians burning off grazing grounds (possibly to improve pasturage, possibly to monopolize the resource) made buffalo scarce around the post. William Tomison reported that he had procured a month of provisions from Indians there, but "that had been purchased at a very dear rate."<sup>49</sup> Waiting for Assiniboine Indians to bring in meat constituted, as he said, "a great Expence for Provisions."

Cumberland House provisioning problems, in turn, have relevance for

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48 See Cocking's instructions in *ibid.*, 12 September 1776.

49 31 December 1779 in *ibid.*, 2: 27.

discussions of the later fur trade. Although the post system extended into parkland, grassland and woodland regions, each with unique game resources, the feature of widening provisioning hinterlands added significant costs to the trade and determined how it was to be undertaken. Duncan M'Gillivrey's journals, kept at Fort George on the Saskatchewan in 1794, share many of the same concerns as Cocking's at Cumberland House. While closer to buffalo grounds, Fort George employees experienced periodic problems gathering enough food and witnessed Assiniboine Indians burning grazing grounds to heighten their provisioning roles.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, when beaver were quickly depleted and the country around the post was "ruined," another post was built further up the Saskatchewan to trade furs while the original was maintained to continue the trade with the *gens du large* — the provisioning Indians who were unwilling to travel to the other post with their vital food supply. What was established was a significantly larger provisioning area and the maintenance of an expensive victualling post, later commonplace when a complex pemmican service for much of the fur trade had been established.<sup>51</sup>

Provisioning became all the more costly as the nineteenth century unfolded: big game animals were reduced in numbers, and such key resources as the buffalo began to disappear. At that time, the HBC had monopoly over a vast fur-trading region and had inherited a prohibitively expensive provisioning responsibility. By the 1860s, the cost of feeding both post employees and Indians trapping in barren game regions mounted significantly in London accounts.<sup>52</sup>

A close analysis of account ledgers would help determine the real cost of provisioning and whether its price increased over time. In the meantime, the feature of expanding provisioning hinterlands might have enabled posts like Cumberland House to exist; but when the interior trade flourished, posts multiplied and employee numbers increased. This strategy had a marked impact on the fur trade as a business endeavour; and, in time, it seriously undermined its commercial viability.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to acknowledge the comments and research suggestions of the late John Foster, Professor of History, University of Alberta.

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50 M'Gillivrey, *The Journal of Duncan M'Gillivrey*, 33.

51 GA, M889, Qu'Appelle Lake Post Journal, 1857-1858; *Fort Pelly Journal of Daily Occurrences*, 1863 (Regina: Regina Archaeological Society, 1987).

52 "Country food," and "goods imported" to posts in the many districts rose significantly between 1874-1877. By then, the Northern Department was supplying Indians with provisions to survive while trapping. See "Report of the Governor and Committee of the Hudson's Bay Company, June 27, 1882," and "Report on the Fur Trade Accounts, 1879," CIHM no. 07873.