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Spring 2011

Review of *Nature's Ghosts: Confronting Extinction  
from the Age of Jefferson to the Age of Ecology*. By Mark  
V. Barrow, Jr.

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Bednekoff, Peter A., "Review of *Nature's Ghosts: Confronting Extinction from the Age of Jefferson to the Age of Ecology*. By Mark V. Barrow, Jr." (2011). *Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences*. 1150.  
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**Nature's Ghosts: Confronting Extinction from the Age of Jefferson to the Age of Ecology.** By Mark V. Barrow, Jr. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009. xi + 497 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$35.95 cloth.

In 1886 William Temple Hornaday realized that perhaps fewer than three hundred bison roamed the Plains. As chief taxidermist for the U.S. National Museum, his reaction was to urge collecting a good series of specimens, up to a hundred if possible. Hornaday's expedition to Montana returned with "twenty-five bison skins, one head skin, sixteen fresh and dry skeletons, fifty-one dry skulls, and two bison fetuses" plus remains of a massive old bull that became the model for the buffalo nickel and the seal of the secretary of the interior. Fortunately, Hornaday also returned with a desire to breed bison and other rare wildlife in captivity. He was instrumental in founding both the U.S. National Zoo and the Bronx Zoo. After some setbacks, he managed to establish a breeding herd at the Bronx Zoo and to send bison back to the wild starting in 1905.

The saving of bison occupies a central place in *Nature's Ghosts*, but Mark Barrow's chronicle extends over a century both before and after. The story starts with Thomas Jefferson and fossils that came to be recognized as mastodons, mammoths, and giant ground sloths. "Jefferson and most of his contemporaries were certain that the natural world was orderly, static, and new." In such a worldview, extinction was unthinkable. Fossil evidence plus the historical extinctions of dodos, moas, and great auks forced reconsideration. Unfortunately, extinction was subsequently viewed as perhaps inevitable for species "past their time." As Hornaday's initial reaction illustrates, collecting rare species frequently happened ahead of efforts to preserve those species. Bison preservation followed immediately, but passenger pigeons and Carolina

parakeets slipped away without any serious attempts at captive breeding.

Extending through the 20th century, *Nature's Ghosts* follows the rise of ecology and conservation biology as disciplines and the construction of institutions to prevent extinction. Science allowed extreme interventions to save California condors and whooping cranes, but was not enough to save heath hens or preserve the Singer Tract for ivory-billed woodpeckers. The book documents that the science of saving species is often complicated, and that the politics is substantially more difficult.

This book ranges across centuries and continents, and only a few parts of it are explicitly about the Great Plains. Nonetheless, it contains valuable lessons for anyone concerned with extinction in the Great Plains and elsewhere. First, the book is a tour de force with nuggets for everyone (e.g., slaves were the first to recognize that teeth dug up in South Carolina resembled those from elephants). Second, the long perspective frames the tasks of the present to be both daunting and doable. The book is full of tales of persistence by both endangered species and dogged individuals. The short view remembers that the Endangered Species Act passed by overwhelming margins in 1973. The book extends our perspective back through two weaker previous Acts and the many occasions of failing to act. Confronting extinction has never been easy, and we should not expect it to become any easier soon. **Peter A. Bednekoff**, *Department of Biology, Eastern Michigan University*.