

# ON THE WHITE MEN

## 1900s

-----*Luther Standing Bear*-----

In the late 17th and early 18th centuries the Sioux peoples migrated west to the Great Plains, including areas in what is today Minnesota, Iowa, North Dakota, and South Dakota. During the 19th century, the Sioux came into increasing conflict with settlers moving westward, engaging in a series of battles (known as the Sioux Wars) that lasted nearly 50 years. In the following excerpt, Luther Standing Bear remarks on some of the cultural differences he observed between Native American and white peoples. Standing Bear was the first son of Chief Standing Bear the First and was chief of the Oglalla Tribe of the Teton Sioux Nation from 1905 to 1939. In 1928 he published his memoirs, *My People the Sioux*.

**THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Comparing and Contrasting**

What differences between white people's and Native Americans' views of nature does Luther Standing Bear observe?

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The white man does not understand the Indian for the reason that he does not understand America. He is too far removed....The roots of the tree of his life have not yet grasped the rock and soil. The white man is still troubled with primitive fears; he still has in his consciousness the perils of this frontier continent, some of its vastness not yet having yielded to his questing footsteps and inquiring eyes....The man from Europe is still a foreigner and an alien. And he still hates the man who questioned his path across the continent. But in the Indian the spirit of the land is still vested; it will be until other men are able to divine and meet its rhythm. Men must be born and reborn to belong. Their bodies must be formed of the dust of their forefathers' bones.

As yet I know of no species of plant, bird, or animal that were exterminated until the coming of the white man. For some years after the buffalo disappeared there still remained huge herds of antelope, but the hunter's work was no sooner done in the destruction of the buffalo than his attention was attracted toward the deer....The white man considered natural animal life just as he did the natural man life upon this continent, as "pests." Plants which the Indian found beneficial were also "pests." There is no word in the Lakota vocabulary with the English meaning of this word...[the Indian] was...kin to all living things and he gave to all creatures equal rights with himself. Everything of earth was loved and revered....[To the white man] the worth and right to live were his, thus he heartlessly destroyed.

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Forests were mowed down, the buffalo exterminated, the beaver driven to extinction and his wonderfully constructed dams dynamited, allowing flood waters to wreak further havoc, and the very birds of the air silenced. Great grassy plains that sweetened the air have been upturned; springs, streams, and lakes that lived no longer ago than my boyhood have dried, and a whole people harassed to degradation and death. The white man has come to be the symbol of extinction for all things natural to this continent. Between him and the animal there is no rapport and they have learned to flee from his approach, for they cannot live on the same ground....

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**THINK THROUGH HISTORY : ANSWER**

Students may answer that Luther Standing Bear finds white and Native American views of nature to be completely opposite. For example, he argues that whites are "too far removed" from nature and fearful of territory they have not yet explored. He argues that whites were the first people to cause the destruction of entire species, while Native Americans consider all creatures equal to themselves. He argues that while whites see many plants and animals as "pests," Native Americans see themselves as "kin to all living things." Native Americans respect and embrace nature. According to Standing Bear, "the white man has come to be the symbol of extinction for all things natural to this continent," because white people have destroyed the natural world he knew as a child.