

FOUNDATIONS OF CIVILIZATION

Viewpoints

Some scientists, led by Paul Martin, think that human hunters in North America were the main reason why many kinds of huge animals, such as the woolly mammoth and the giant sloth, disappeared about 10,000 years ago. Others, such as paleontologist Edwin Colbert, attribute the extinction to other causes. ♦ *As you read about this prehistoric mystery, think about what it might mean for us today. Then, on a separate sheet of paper, answer the questions that follow.*

What Killed the Woolly Mammoth?**Paul S. Martin**

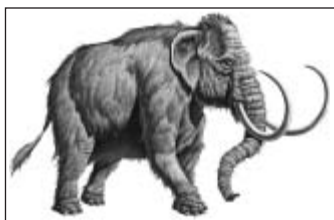
About 10,000 years ago, as glaciers retreated into Canada and as man moved southward at the end of the last Ice Age, North America suddenly and strangely lost most of its large animals. Native North American mammals exceeding 100 pounds in adult body weight were reduced by roughly 70 percent. The casualty list includes mammoths, mastodon, many species of horses and camels, . . . the giant beaver, tapirs and others totaling over 100 species. . . .

. . . My own hypothesis is that man, and man alone, was responsible for the unique wave of Late Pleistocene extinction. . . . About 12,000 years ago, when the Paleo-Indians swept into North America across the Bering bridge . . . we can be confident that they were old hands at hunting woolly mammoths and other large Eurasian mammals. In contrast, the New World mammoth and other species of big game had never encountered man and were unprepared for escaping the strange two-legged creature who used fire and stone-tipped spears to hunt them in communal bands.

Sources: (1) "Pleistocene Overkill," by Paul S. Martin; (2) "Mammoths and Men," by Edwin H. Colbert; both in *Ants, Indians, and Little Dinosaurs*, ed. by Alan Ternes (The American Museum of Natural History, 1975).

Edwin H. Colbert

Then at the end of the Ice Age, when the last of the great continental glaciers was retreating . . . there was a relatively sudden and wide-spread extinction of mammoths throughout the world. The woolly mammoth disappeared from northern Europe, Asia, and North America, as did the more southerly types in these continents. . . .

**Woolly mammoth**

What was the reason for the wiping out of the mammoths?

Why should these huge and seemingly successful animals suddenly disappear from a scene which they had so long dominated? Was man concerned with their extinction? It hardly seems probable, for even though at this late date he was a clever and an efficient hunter, he was still rather scattered—certainly not a numerous member of the faunas* to which he belonged. Therefore, it is difficult to see how primitive hunters might have prevailed against the mammoths to such an extent as to cause their sudden and almost complete destruction. The answer to this question may always remain a secret.

* the animals of a specified region or time

Questions to Think About

1. What facts about the disappearance of the animals do both writers accept?
2. How does Martin explain the extinction of large animals? What does Colbert think?
3. **Determine Relevance** Why is it important that the extinctions occurred soon after humans arrived on a new continent?
4. **Recognize Cause and Effect** What efforts are you aware of that are being made today to avoid large-scale extinctions like the ones described in the excerpts?