



Jefferson, Buffon, and the Mighty American Moose

While serving as U.S. minister to France, Thomas Jefferson wrote to John Sullivan of New Hampshire on Jan. 7, 1786, asking him to send to Paris “the skin, the skeleton, and the horns of the Moose, the Caribou, or Elk ... but most especially those of the moose.”

Jefferson specified how he would prefer the animal dressed: “To leave the hoof on, to leave the bones of the legs and of the thighs if possible in the skin, and to leave also the bones of the head in the skin with the horns on, so that by sewing up the neck and belly of the skin we should have the true form and size of the animal.” Such an acquisition, Jefferson wrote, would be “more precious than you can imagine.”

Such a request may seem a curious one from an American diplomat charged primarily with negotiating commercial

treaties, but there is more to link diplomacy, commerce, and natural science than might first appear.

Since the mid 18th century, European naturalists had proposed that animals, vegetation and even humankind degenerated on the American continent due to the climate. In his one full-length book, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson confronted the theories of the leading French naturalist, George Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, who contended that the animals of America were smaller in size and number. In refuting Buffon, Jefferson compiled charts comparing the sizes of animals of both continents, and of the moose noted, “I have seen a

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1788 miniature of Jefferson by John Trumbull.

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Moose

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skeleton 7 feet high, and from good information believe they are often considerably higher. The Elk of Europe is not two-thirds of his height.” In addition, Jefferson believed the American moose to be a distinct species.

No doubt there was an element of personal pride, as a man of science, in refuting these misconceptions, but as an American minister charged with promoting the growth and commerce of his young country, Jefferson seemed intent on not just letting these allegations prove themselves wrong over time. The growth and prosperity of the new nation depended upon a positive image that would encourage immigration and commerce.

More than a year after Jefferson’s request, a box arrived in Paris containing skin, bones, and horns. Sullivan, a Revolutionary War general who was elected governor of New Hampshire in 1786, wrote that processing the animal as Jefferson requested had been “difficult,” but that he had succeeded, except for leaving in the bones of the head. However, the skin of the head was “whole and well dresst,” and even though the horns did not belong to this particular moose, perhaps “they may be fixed on.”

Jefferson seemed pleased enough when he reported back to Sullivan: “They were all in good enough condition except that a good deal of the hair of the Moose had fallen off. However there remained still enough to give a good idea of the animal, and I am in hopes Monsieur de Buffon will be able to have him stuffed and placed on his legs in the king’s cabinet.”

Jefferson was disappointed that the horns of the elk and deer, also included, appeared “remarkeably small.” Nevertheless, the remains of the moose and the other horns were delivered to the Jardin du Roi, the natural history center where the Comte de Buffon was superintendent, with an apology from Jefferson for the amount of hair missing from the moose along with a disclaimer that he had seen deer that must



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Moose antlers from New England, circa 1786.

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Moose

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have weighed five or six times more than those represented by the enclosed antlers.

Though Buffon was away due to ill health when the box arrived, he charged an assistant to send a note of thanks for this contribution to natural science. It is not certain whether the moose was ever displayed as Jefferson had hoped. Many years later, he remarked to Daniel Webster that Buffon “promised in his next volume, to set these things right also: but he died directly afterwards.”

Nevertheless, Jefferson as diplomat, scientist, and citizen went to unusual lengths and personal expense to dispel unfavorable myths about his country by attempting to prove once and for all that the American moose was indeed unique and definitely bigger than its European counterparts.

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