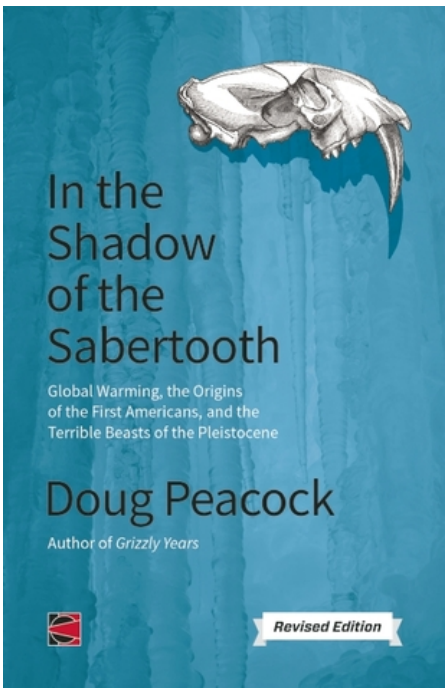

In the Shadow of the Sabertooth: Global Warming, the Origins of the First Americans, and the Terrible Beasts of the Pleistocene

Doug Peacock

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"Doug Peacock, as ever, walks point for all of us. Not since Bill McKibben's *The End of Nature* has a book of such import been presented to readers. Peacock's intelligence defies measure. His is a beautiful, feral heart, always robust, relentless with its love and desire for the human race to survive, and be sculpted by the coming hard times: to learn a magnificent humility, even so late in the game. Doug Peacock's mind is a marvel—there could be no more generous act than the writing of this book. It is a crowning achievement in a long career sent in service of beauty and the dignity of life."—Rick Bass, author of *Why I Came West* and *The Lives of Rocks*
Our climate is changing fast. The future is uncertain, probably fiery, and likely terrifying. Yet shifting weather patterns have threatened humans before, right here in North America, when people first colonized this continent. About 15,000 years ago, the weather began to warm, melting the huge glaciers of the Late Pleistocene. In this brand new landscape, humans managed to adapt to unfamiliar habitats and dangerous creatures in the midst of a wildly fluctuating climate. What was it like to live with huge pack-hunting lions, saber-toothed cats, dire wolves, and gigantic short-faced bears, to hunt now extinct horses, camels, and mammoth? Are there lessons for modern people lingering along this ancient trail?

The shifting weather patterns of today—what we call "global warming"—will far exceed anything our ancestors previously faced. Doug Peacock's latest narrative explores the full circle of climate change, from the death of the megafauna to the depletion of the ozone, in a deeply personal story that takes readers from Peacock's participation in an archeological dig for early Clovis remains in Livingston, MT, near his home, to the death of the local whitebark pine trees in the same region, as a result of changes in the migration pattern of pine beetles with the warming seasons.

Writer and adventurer **Doug Peacock** has spent the past fifty years wandering the earth's wildest places, studying grizzly bears and advocating for the preservation of wilderness. He is the author of *Grizzly Years*; *Baja*; and *Walking It Off* and co-author of *The Essential Grizzly*. Peacock was named a 2007 Guggenheim Fellow, and a 2011 Lannan Fellow.

In Oakland, California on March 24, 2015 a fire destroyed the AK Press warehouse along with several other businesses. Please consider visiting the AK Press website to learn more about the fundraiser to help them and their neighbors.

In the Shadow of the Sabertooth: Global Warming, the Origins of the First Americans, and the Terrible Beasts of the Pleistocene Details

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From Reader Review In the Shadow of the Sabertooth: Global Warming, the Origins of the First Americans, and the Terrible Beasts of the Pleistocene for online ebook

Marc says

There’s a feeling you get in Grizzly country when you’re passing too close to what looks like a perfect location for a bear’s day bed. Maybe a thicket of huckleberries, maybe an island grove of cottonwood with plenty of downed limbs and new undergrowth. But whatever it is, you stop in your tracks. Silent alarms are triggered, your hackles rise to attention, you forget to breathe.

That’s how it feels to come to the end of Doug Peacock’s latest book, In the Shadow of the Sabertooth: A Renegade Naturalist Considers Global Warming, the First Americans and the Terrible Beasts of the Pleistocene. The challenge he presents, vividly and unapologetically, of just how to respond to the effects of our long and brutal war against our own climate commands our focus and demands a decision.

Peacock’s writings, in one way or another, always elicit such a response. The difference is, in his earlier books, Grizzly Years and Walking It Off, the alarm is vicarious. One reacts to his harrowing experiences in Vietnam and close-calls with charging bears, or to his memories of walking the fine line between life and death in a southwestern desert or Himalayan snowfield. In this new book, the danger is not in his past, rather it’s in our collective future. And it’s a future that is so looming and imminent, that if we are to survive at all, we had better accept the idea that it is our present.

In the Shadow of the Sabertooth lays out the story of the great adventure of the first Americans in a visceral way that only a true American adventurer could. But more than that, it gives us the profound and desperately needed hope that we, today, can learn from our ancestors. That we can choose to preserve the one thing that can possibly sustain us through this current upheaval: Wilderness, that primordial memory of our evolutionary success that Thoreau rightly addressed when he wrote, “In wildness is the preservation of the world.” And finally, that we can heed the threat of the sabertooth lurking in the shadows, and once again rise to the challenge.

Richard Reese says

Doug Peacock, the grizzly bear expert, lives near the Yellowstone River in Montana. In 1968, the largest collection of Clovis artifacts was found not far from his home, on the Anzick ranch. The Clovis culture of Native Americans existed for about 300 years, from 13,100 to 12,800 to years ago — during the era of megafauna extinctions. Of the 35 genera of large mammals that went extinct in America, half of them vanished in a 500-year period, from 13,200 to 12,700 years ago.

The Clovis culture developed a new and improved design for the flaked stone points used as spearheads. The long broad sharp points made it much easier to kill large animals, like mammoths and mastodons. Amazingly, this new technology spread to every corner of North America within just 200 years. Clovis points are sometimes found close to the remains of extinct animals. Clovis technology appeared suddenly, and vanished suddenly.

Today, the waters of the Bering Strait separate Siberia from Alaska. During ice ages, sea levels dropped, and the strait became dry land, called Beringia. Around 20,000 years ago, the last era of glaciation peaked. The glaciers made it impossible to travel from Beringia to warmer regions in the south. Few, if any, humans migrated into America prior to 15,000 years ago.

About 14,700 years ago, the climate changed when the Bøling-Allerød warming period began. At that time, sea levels were 450 feet (137 m) lower than today. During the warm period, thawing opened up a corridor to the south, vegetation recovered, and by 13,100 years ago, it became possible to migrate from Beringia to Alberta and northern Montana.

The human immigrants from Siberia did not live at the top of the food chain. They often had lunch dates with hungry sabertooth cats, lions, dire wolves, American cheetahs, grizzlies, and short-faced bears. Short-faced bears weighed a ton, and when they stood on their hind legs, were 15 feet tall (4.5 m). Maybe Clovis points were invented to reduce losses to predators. Better weapons also made it easier to hunt large animals.

After 1492, the early European explorers were astounded by the incredible abundance of wildlife in the Americas, compared to the battered ecosystems back home. But what they saw in America was actually a biosphere that was missing many important pieces. The zenith of American wildlife was prior to 13,000 years ago.

So, the Clovis period began, existed for 300 years, and vanished. It ended when the frigid Younger Dryas period began, 12,800 years ago. The Younger Dryas lasted 1,300 years. When warmer times returned, some clever people began fooling around with plant and animal domestication, which blew the lid off Pandora's Box. We're still living in this warm phase, an unusually long period of climate stability. We're long overdue for another ice age, but industrial civilization has seriously botched the planet's atmosphere, and we're sliding sideways into an era of ecological helter-skelter.

There are four theories about the megafauna extinctions, and this subject is the source of decades of loud shouting and hair-pulling. One theory asserts that a comet or asteroid strike filled the atmosphere with dust, causing a very long winter. Where's the crater? There is none, because the impact hit a glacier. Why did the short-faced bears vanish, but not the other bears? How did moose, bison, elk, and humans manage to survive?

The disease theory notes that some viral pathogens, like influenza or cowpox, are sometimes able to transfer from one species to another. Maybe species that migrated from Asia smuggled in some virulent viruses. But species-to-species transfers are more likely to happen in confined conditions, like barnyards and livestock herds. During the extinctions, a variety of browsers, grazers, and carnivores disappeared, from an entire continent, in a short stretch of time.

The climate change theory notes that when the Younger Dryas blast freezer moved in 12,800 years ago, the Clovis culture suddenly vanished. Eventually, "nearly every animal over 220 pounds (100 kg) died off and only animals weighing less than that survived this extinction. A notable exception was the grizzly, along with modern bison, moose, elk, caribou, musk ox, polar bear, and chunky humans." Why hadn't numerous earlier ice ages caused similar mass extinctions?

Paul Martin was the father of the Pleistocene overkill theory, which asserts, that man, and man alone, was responsible for the unique wave of Late Pleistocene extinctions. He believed that the American extinctions occurred rapidly, in a "blitzkrieg" of overhunting. He argued that across many thousands of years, extinction events corresponded to human colonization — in Australia, the Americas, Tasmania, New Zealand, the

Caribbean, and so on.

Hunting clearly played a role, but it's hard to believe that all of the horses and wolves in America were driven to extinction by hunters with spears. Blitzkrieg seems like too strong a word. Unlike mice and bunnies, large mammals have low rates of reproduction. "If hunters remove just 4 or 5 percent of a population of slow-reproducing wildlife, those animals are on a road headed toward extinction." The megafauna extinctions could have occurred gradually, over decades and generations, too slowly to raise alarm.

Climate shifts can spur extinctions. The hills near Peacock's home are red, because pine beetles are killing the whitebark pines. The beetles are thriving because warmer winters enable more to survive. For grizzlies, pine nuts are a dietary staple. He worries that the bears might be driven to extinction by tiny beetles that benefit from the emissions of consumer society.

Let's zoom back to the Clovis site discovered near Peacock's home in 1968. He didn't learn about the site until the mid-1990s. Scientists had hauled away a bunch of artifacts, but didn't return to perform a thorough excavation. Peacock was able to encourage additional work at the site, which began in 1999. This inspired a years-long adventure in learning, which eventually resulted in a book, *In the Shadow of the Sabertooth*.

The Anzick site was the richest discovery of Clovis artifacts. Among the findings was the skeleton of a boy, about 18 months old, the only remains of a Clovis human ever found. It is also the oldest human skeleton found in the Americas. The results of DNA sequencing were published in 2014. "The Montana Clovis people are direct ancestors to some 80 percent of all Native North and South Americans living today." This line came from Northeastern Asia. The boy's genes strongly resemble those of a 24,000 year old skeleton from Lake Baikal in Central Siberia.

"The one unmistakable lesson of the Late Pleistocene extinction is that human activity combined with global warming is a potential, ageless, deadly blueprint for ecological disaster." Today, the disaster we're creating will be of far greater magnitude, and technology will not be able to rescue us. It's time to rise up and defend this planet.

For readers who have a comprehensive working knowledge of paleontology, this book might be easy to understand. It summarizes the highlights of decades of scholarly research, and comments on the major controversies. General readers (like me) are more likely to struggle with the non-linear presentation. Be sure to look at the revised edition (2014), not the first edition (2013). The first edition was printed before Peacock could review, correct, and polish the manuscript, due to a health crisis — and the text was a mess. The Kindle version is the first edition.

Bob Simpson says

Doug Peacock speculates about the North American mass extinctions and drastic climate changes at the end of Pleistocene, as well as the rise and seeming disappearance of the Clovis people. Throughout the book he asks questions about how we will face drastic climate change, a change of our own making. Fans of short faced bears will love this book. This fearsome now extinct giant figures prominently in the story as does its more adaptable cousin the grizzly.

Brooke says

My friends know I follow writers who specialize in western landscapes, and a few months ago one of them asked me what Doug Peacock was up to. I'd heard Peacock was working on a book about a different, earlier time when our species faced a warming climate and what we might learn from that now. But that wasn't what I said. I said, "I think he's writing his memoir of the Pleistocene."

I caught myself. Peacock couldn't write a 'memoir' of the Pleistocene, that geological epoch lasting from 2.5 million to 11,000 years ago and marked by massive glaciation and the Paleolithic Era, Of course he couldn't--he wasn't there.

I wasn't that far off. I can see that now, having read his latest book, In the Shadow of the Sabertooth. (Counterpunch/AK Press, 2013)

Peacock's previous writing (four books and dozens of articles) document his deep experience with death, grizzlies, "living off the land", and walking, floating, climbing the earth's wildest parts. With this book, he mixes what he's learned from his wild life with his insatiable appetite for knowledge (the book's bibliography alone is worth its cover price) in the soup of his potent imagination. The result is the story of "the Greatest Adventure" -- the story of the first people coming to America. They found:

a land bountiful without parallel, the bright habitats beckoning with adventure, sizzling with life and devoid of any trace of human occupation. But it also bristles with dangerous beasts, formidable water crossings and massive ice fields.....
Peacock writes as if he was there because in a way he still is.
The book's main text is a serious discussion about the different controversies surrounding the peopling of the Americas: Who were they? When, why, and how did they come? And most exciting: Has their ability to adapt -- to a wildly fluctuating climate, to the short-faced bears, dire wolves, Sabertoothed cats, and Pleistocene lions that wanted to eat them -- been passed on to us?

Between facts, well-founded speculations, and serious questions, readers will find both entries from journals Peacock has kept during the five decades he's spent exploring the world's wild corners, and life-like scenarios of the Pleistocene travelers he's dreamed. They are eerily similar.

Abalone clung to rocks at lower tide levels and crabs and octopus lived in the tide pools.....the people lightly roasted seaweed on the fire and used it to roll up crabmeat like a Pleistocene burrito.
And:

I decided to go for the clams....I dig down a few inches off to the side of the siphon holes until I can see the elongated shell of the clam. I pluck out the three-inch long shellfish and repeat the process a couple of dozen times. ....I kindle a fire between beached cedar logs...
In the wilds, not much has changed in 15,000 years.

I thought the earliest Americans came from Asia to northwest Alaska via the Bering Strait, which, with so much of the world's seawater frozen into the epoch's massive glaciers was then a land bridge. In this book, I learned that we may have also traveled down ice-free corridors between retreating glaciers. And there's the likelihood that some moved down the Pacific coastline using small boats to cross the hundreds of inlets,

fjords, and rivers dumping frigid water and icebergs directly into the ocean.

Peacock imagines what these early travelers ate (rivers "clear of glacier-scour clouding, throbbing with salmon"), the predators they encountered (hunters listening all night to the huge short-faced bear feeding on the Mastodon they had just killed, as it "cracked bones with his massive jaws") and the wild beauty they were the first humans to stand before, awe-filled. And from Peacock's journal we get a sense not only of what crossing an Arctic river ("a mere 100 feet or so across, and lined with bucket-sized boulders") might have been like, but a step-by-step guide to how he did it with a cheap rubber raft and a length of rope.

This entry made me squeamish, recalling a hike I took with Peacock in Yellowstone and the raft he wanted to build from dead saplings and nylon cord to paddle across Yellowstone Lake to save a day of walking. I had nightmares, hearing the screams of Boy Scouts as they drowned in that lake, after huge wind-driven waves swamped their canoes. I managed to talk him down off of that idea, but he's yet to let me forget it.

Most of that hike (and many others I've had in wilderness) could have taken place in the Pleistocene. That's the beauty and value of wilderness. It's where we were born and where, Peacock asserts, "our own organic consciousness evolved". Peacock believes that we must fight "to protect the wild; wilderness will buy us the kind of time geo-engineering never could or will." By wandering in the wilderness "from whence we came, that original homeland that carved the human mind..." we might also discover that those same survival tools that kept our ancestors safe (from cold and raging rivers, a pack of dire wolves, Pleistocene lion, or short-faced bear) will work against the modern monsters we've created with that same mind.

Perhaps.

If not, so be it. I'll be fine now that I know three key things: how to defend myself against marauding mammals with a long pointed stick, the dull end braced against the ground; that bones from fresh carcasses are combustible and burn hot in a fire; and eating a stew of tasty Amanita phalloides mushrooms might be a pleasurable way to die.

Whether we crumble into a massive heap, adapt, or miraculously dodge the slow moving climate bullet, will depend not just on scientists, economists, politicians, and preachers, but on those who can connect us to a past when we faced monsters and survived. We need story-tellers like Peacock who are scanning the horizon, sniffing the air (being sure to avoid carcasses) while imagining our way forth.

by

Brooke Williams

Mark Bailey says

Doug Peacock is a force with a point. He travels with kindred spirits. When asked to be "the bear guy" and walk point when out in polar bear country on a beluga whale expedition to the Canadian High Arctic, the weapon he chose to protect his clients was a home made spear. I'd like to hear what his pals on the trip, Bart Lewis, Rick Ridgeway and Doug Tompkins had to say about that. I imagine them right behind him, tense and grinning.

Peacock was serious. Having spent big chunks of time with bears he respects and reveres them. The same for the wild country they come from. In IN THE SHADOW OF THE SABERTOOTH, the reader can draw on his immense experience in the wild to help make sense of the narrow, arcane, academic and political landscape of early North America archeology. It is a notion of inquiry that I applaud. In the towering needles of the academic silo today, the forest gets lost for the tree, if not the cellulose. A smart, experience layman to take a big picture look at what North America looked like when humans first appeared is an enticing prospect and Peacock does just that.

I gave 4 stars instead of 5 not because of issues with the author perhaps, but more with his editor. This is great material but it could have been laid out better. Too much is repeated and not enough time developing what it would have been like to be there as the ice began to melt 13,000 years ago. Not that you would last long. Have you heard of the Short-faced Bear? 6 feet tall with a nose that can smell a carcass 20 miles away, and no natural fear of humans, Peacock speculates that it may not have been possible for humans to survive while it was around in numbers.

Up to date archeology and a big picture perspective from a guy who has actually spent real time in wild places make this an armchair expedition worthy of a place on the bookshelf.

Kirk Astroth says

This book by Doug is quite different from his other works and seeks to understand the massive Pleistocene extinction of the megafauna of 13,000 years ago. Was it climate change, mankind's efficiency of hunting using Clovis technology, diseases introduced by hunting dogs of Native peoples or a combination? Unfortunately the answers are still not clear.

What is clear at the end of all this is that technology has empowered us "to bring on devastating climate changes within a mere 250 years"--the same period of time during which megafauna went extinct in the Pleistocene. Peacock argues that technology will not bail us out. The "preservation of wild habitats will be central to our own struggle to survive the climatic upheavals of the 21st century." Only "Wilderness will buy us the kind of time geo-engineering never could or will." The trouble, Peacock observes, is that it might be too late in the climate game to plan for transition.

Scientists themselves are constantly playing catch up when it comes to underestimating the magnitude, speed and consequences of a warming climate. Is it any surprise the public doesn't seem to get it? But governments have no excuse. The solution is not more government bailouts or technological fixes. The issue is really that we are living an obsolete way of life. Endless growth is impossible in a world of finite resources. It is time to confront our sabertoothed cat. What will we do?

Ralph says

Doug Peacock writes as though he were talking with you over a beer. I have known about him since I was a ranger int he Tetons in the late 60's or early 70's, although I can't recall if we have ever met. He was the model for Edward Abby's protagonist, George Hayduke, in "The Monkey Wrench Gang". At the Mountain Film Festival in Telluride this past May, I watched "Wrenched", the story of the environmental movement and monkey-wrenching that grew out of Abby's book. Doug was well represented. So when I saw he had a

new book on the possible migrations of peoples from Asia into the Americas and the issues surrounding our current global climate change crisis, I got the book and read it on a plane to New York yesterday. I wasn't disappointed. Many of his personal thoughts on the practicality of access routes into the New World by early peoples echoed my own thoughts and experiences living in Alaska and working with the Beringia International Heritage program. It's a fun read, full of many ideas that an archeologist would ponder, but also connected to our present plight on the planet. He doesn't shy away from controversial issues or from giving his opinion on many issues: the lack of respect for Native American grave sites, climate change, early migration possibilities, and archeology of the New World. Tons of fun and full of thought.

James says

Love it! Very fascinating layman's look at the first humans in the Americas and the potential effects on big mammals like Mammoths. Peacock has a background in bears, and looks at the gigantic short-face bears detriment in earlier human settlement. It is a somewhat chilling view of our future existence on the planet given the environmental destruction of the entire Earth.

Susan says

Generally I did not like the author's style. I kept reading because of the subject matter, but I imagine there are other books on the topic that would have flowed better. Still, I am more informed now than I was when I started this book.

Mike says

A fine account and meditation on the coming of people to North America and the loss of the continent's megafauna and what implications it holds as we face climate change.

Paul says

The writing is hit and miss, but this is an extremely interesting book, particularly when the author describes the spread of the Clovis culture in such a short period of time, facing off against the massive short-faced bear and pursuing mammoths across North America.

Patrick Dean says

A fascinating book by a fascinating character, a 'renegade naturalist' who went to the mountains to recover from Vietnam and has probably spent more time in the wild with grizzlies than anyone alive. Peacock examines the archaeological and paleontological evidence regarding the first humans in the Americas. He examines the major prehistorical puzzles: why did the Clovis culture (known for its beautiful spear points) spread so rapidly through the Americas, and then vanish so suddenly and utterly? Why did the megafauna of

the late Pleistocene -- sabertoothed tigers, mammoths, short-faced bears -- vanish at pretty much the same time? Did the Clovis humans and/or the rapid global warming (the last such episode until now) contribute?

One sizable quibble I have with this book is the editing. There is quite a bit of repetition, even allowing for the author's intention to keep the reader following what is pretty detailed, if not convoluted, historical and scientific data.

Steven McKay says

I really wanted to enjoy this book, and I did enjoy parts, but ultimately I couldn't finish it, a rare occurrence. On the positive side, I enjoyed the speculative scenarios of human migration into the Americas, as well as the descriptions of the landscapes and wildlife. On the negative side, this book really needed an editor. It felt disorganized, jumping around and repeating itself, and I personally had a hard time sometimes differentiating between the author's opinions and the archeological arguments he was debating. Throw in the infinitesimal font size (as small as 3/32 of an inch, less than 3mm), and this book became something of an ordeal to read.

Billy Duke says

I love Doug Peacock and I love AK Press! Thank you Goodreads and AK Press for my First Reads copy!
