

A Garden... or a Desert?

The Lewis and Clark Expedition's Assessment of the West

Was the West a garden or a desert? In 1803, President Jefferson commissioned Lewis and Clark to report on the Western lands of the Louisiana Purchase, particularly their potential for agricultural purposes.



"All those parts of the hills which were free of snow easily dissolved and washed into the soil and bottom, and these hills under winter the snow rests, signed into it and dissolved and mixed with the water of the river..."

William Clark—Champlain, NY, September 14, 1804



"...a cloudy morning & hazy all Day then the breaking of the clouds, which had set on Day by the Minnesotta [sic] a heavy crop of grass, as an enticement for the Indians to feed on."

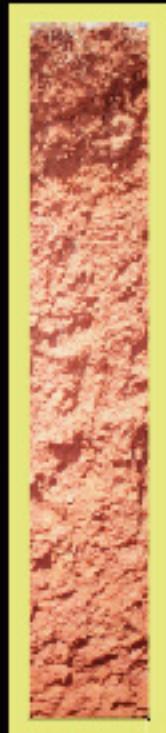
William Clark—Pt. Moulton, ND, October 24, 1804

NRCS was created in the 20th Century and addresses similar interests. Lewis and Clark described soils based on the kinds of plants and animals they would support, as well as other qualities and properties. NRCS soil scientists use similar descriptions today.

Jefferson's charge to Lewis and Clark reflected the need of our young nation to know and understand its natural resources. Today, NRCS helps people conserve, maintain, and improve our natural resources and environment through local, state, and national partnerships.



Below: Site of soils used by Lewis and Clark, with modern tools—a Shovelotec on the left and a TDR probe.



Closeup soil profile made at Minnesota by NRCS personnel, as seen in the photo at left.

Above: Artwork of a series of banners prepared commemorating the bicentennial of the Lewis and Clark expedition. All were created using natural soil pigments by NRCS employee Dan Lang.