

Guano

Lead: As world population grew in the years before and after 1800 so did the demand for food. At the same time, much farm acreage was depleted, tired, unproductive. This problem was solved in part with guano.

Intro.: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.

Content: Guano is bird excrement. Grouped with the droppings of bats and seals, it is perhaps the most potent natural fertilizer, and bird guano is the primo variety containing

up to 16% nitrogen, 12% phosphorus, and 3% potassium. In the mid-19th century, guano was treated as if it were gold, provoked at least one fighting war, and made enormous fortunes for growers and suppliers alike.

In 1804 geographer Alexander von Humboldt returned from an expedition to South America. Among his other discoveries was a sample of guano, taken from islands off the coast of Peru. Tested by farmers, it was determined to be a most potent and effective fertilizer. Many of the farms of Britain, Europe and the Eastern United States were depleted. Guano could bring them back into productivity.

By the 1840s island guano was the subject of international dispute. Peru, the source of the richest deposits, jealously guarded its islands as a valuable national resource and charged premium prices to extract the guano, which after thousands of years of bird visits, was in places 150 feet deep. This set off a world-wide guano rush, intensive expeditions to find undiscovered islands loaded with the stuff. The United States passed the Guano Island Act in 1856 which permitted citizens to claim guano rich islands for the United States should they find them. Baker, Jarvis, Howland Christmas, Johnson, and Midway Islands became U.S. territory as a result of the guano rush. In 1879

Peru and Bolivia fought the Guano War or War of the Pacific in part to secure the mineral rich guano islands off the coast of South America.

By 1900 the mad search for guano was over as better, synthesized fertilizers had become universally accessible. Guano, however, has recently come back into fashion with growth of organic farming.

At the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.

Resources

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www.guano.com

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