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# Rival Ecologies of Global Commerce: Adam Smith and the Natural Historians

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THE VERY FIRST PLANT that the Finnish naturalist Pehr Kalm noticed as he set

foot in America in 1748 was a tuft of native grass, a species of the genus *Andropogon*. The sight induced a flash of taxonomic vertigo. How could a single natural historian cope with a whole continent of new species?

“Whenever I looked to the ground I found everywhere such plants as I had never seen before ... I was seized with terror at the thought of ranging so many new and unknown parts of natural history.”<sup>1</sup> While Kalm's moment of confusion perhaps was exaggerated for rhetorical effect, the episode captures the new centrality of natural knowledge in the world of eighteenth-century commerce. Between 1748 and 1751, Kalm surveyed the colonial environment from Philadelphia through New Jersey and then north up the Hudson...

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