

FOR TEACHERS



A short animation about beaver pelts and the fur trade serves as a context for further investigation and study of how HBC, through its trade with Canada's First Nations, was a major contributor to Canada's story.

Information about Beaver Pelts

History

- The beaver was the most valuable pelt sought by the European traders. Seventeenth century European fashion demanded that anyone of style simply had to have a beaver hat.
- Hudson's Bay Company's Coat of Arms features four beavers, emphasizing the importance of the beaver trade to the Company.
- Marc Lescarbot (1570 - 1629), a historian who lived in early New France, wrote this description of how the First Nations trapped Beaver:

"When they wish to catch the beaver, [the First Nations] break the ice of a frozen lake. Then one thrusts his arm into the hole, waiting for the beaver, while another goes out on the ice and beats it with a stick to frighten the beaver back to his lodging. Then one must be nimble to seize him by the neck."

Characteristics

- Thanks to the dense fur of the undercoat, the felt produced from the beaver pelt made a luxurious hat, waterproof, with an incredible sheen. The hats were so precious that a man might leave one to his son in his will.
- Two grades of pelt were recognized. "Castor gras" or "coat beaver" were pelts taken by the First Nations when prime, trimmed into rectangular shape, 5 to 8 of them sewn together and worn with the fur next to the body for 12 to 18 months. Constant friction of the fur reversed against the skin gradually loosened the outer guard hairs and sweat added a glossy sheen. As such, the skin became well greased, pliable and yellow in colour.
- "Castor sec" or "parchment beaver," on the other hand, designated the beaver pelt that has been stretched flat, dried, and brought in immediately by the First Nations. Castor sec still had the guard hair and lacked the thickness and quality of "castor gras."
- Castoreum from the beaver's scent glands (a natural source of acetylsalicylic acid - aspirin) was medicinally used for treating aches and pains.

Beaver Hats

- Hats were an important item of clothing and denoted an individual's social status and occupation.
- Originally centred in France, the hat-making industry was to a great degree the preserve of Huguenots (French Protestants). Over 10,000 hatters emigrated to England after the Edict of Nantes, which had allowed them the freedom to practise their religion, was revoked in 1685. France's hat-making industry collapsed while England became the centre of production.
- Beaver produced the best felt and thus the highest quality hats.
- Beaver hats were water-repellent. This fact, coupled with the fact that many hats had wide brims, may help explain their popularity in a rainy climate prior to the invention of the umbrella.
- Legends abounded that wearing a beaver hat made you smarter.
- Beaver felt declined in the mid-nineteenth century when silk velour was found to be less expensive yet just as stylish. Prince Albert, consort to Queen Victoria, popularized the wearing of silk hats.

HBC Web Resources

Beaver Pelt Animation

Picture Boards

A Fur Press
Carrying Cargo
Measuring a Beaver Skin
HBC Trade Goods
Trading Ceremony
Fashion in Beaver Hats
Inventory of Beaver Hats

Standard of Trade

Beaver Hats

People

Radisson and des Groseilliers
Maude Watt
James Watt

Learning Centre Timeline - 1600's to 1800's

HBC E-Books Adventurers

The Adventurer 1660 to 1720
The Long Struggle with Montreal 1713 to 1821
Give Us Good Measure 1821 to 1870
Teacher's Guide

Learning Centre Videos

Canoe Poster

HBC Image Gallery

Beaver Hat - Trade and Retail - Image #2
Beaver Skin - Trade and Retail - Image #16

External Websites

Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development
Canada

Province of Manitoba Archives, HBC Fur Trade
Tokens

The Beaver and Other Pelts, McGill University
Rethinking the Beaver, *Canadian Geographic*
The Crees of Waskaganish First Nation

IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

Big Idea

The demand for beaver pelts for hat-making established a viable trading process between the Europeans and the First Nations.

Critical Questions

- Why was the beaver pelt so valuable to Europeans?
- Why was the fur trade valuable to the First Nations?
- How did the fur trade lead to the formation of the Hudson's Bay Company?

Curriculum Connection *Intermediate Grades*

Trade between First Nations and Europeans in early Canada

Getting Started

The animated story can serve as a way to generate students' interest in learning more about why the beaver pelt was a valued trade commodity in Europe.

After students view the animation, they share their thoughts by responding to questions such as:

- What did you learn from the story of the beaver pelt?
- What did you find most interesting?
- What surprised you?
- What more would you like to find out about beaver pelts?

Following the discussion, students identify an investigation they would like to conduct, decide where they will get the information and how they will share it with the class. Students might be interested in learning more about topics such as trapping of the beaver, preparation of the beaver pelts, and transportation of beaver pelts to Europe.

Concept Benefit of the Trading Process

The fur trade for the beaver in Canada benefited the First Nations and the Europeans.

Task

Students view selected areas of the HBC website for information about the development of the fur trade in Canada and benefits to both First Nations and Europeans

Questions to Guide Students' Thinking

- Why were the beaver pelts in such demand in Europe?
- How did the demand for beaver pelts in Europe encourage adventurers to investigate what is now Canada?
- Why were the trade goods listed on the Standard of Trade valuable to the First Nations?
- Why was the Standard of Trade created?
- What was the trade ceremony? Why do you think it was important for the trading process?
- What might have happened between tribes as one tribe traded with HBC before another?
- What were the stages of preparation and storage of the pelts for the journey to England?
- How did the actions of the Northwest Company force the HBC to change its strategy for locating trading posts?

Students decide how to communicate and share the information. They could:

- select a trade item from the Standard of Trade listing, research why it was valuable to the First Nations and contribute their information to a class montage.
- plan and act out a trading ceremony that started a session of the trading process.
- use a graphic organizer to show the stages of pelt preparation before sending them to England through Hudson Bay.

Concept Fur Trade and the Development of the Hudson's Bay Company

The demand for the beaver pelt led to numerous trade routes being used in North America and to the founding of the Hudson's Bay Company.

Task

Students search selected areas of the HBC website for connections between development of the fur trade and the founding and activities of the Hudson's Bay Company.

Questions to Guide Students' Thinking

- Why did Radisson and des Groseilliers seek a northern route into North America?
- What forts on Hudson Bay were built between the years 1670 and 1680? Why?
- How did the opening of the forts indicate that the fur trade had been successful for the Europeans?
- Which groups of Europeans competed in the fur trade and where did each group tend to trade for furs?
- What was the effect on the First Nations of the merger between the Northwest Company and the Hudson's Bay Company?
- How did George Simpson improve the operations of HBC?

Students decide how to communicate and share the information. They could:

- mark on a map of Canada the location of HBC forts or trading posts, the year they were founded and in an information bubble include a brief description of the purpose of each location.
- compose and present a speech that Radisson or des Groseilliers might have given in England to convince investors that sailing into Hudson Bay to trade for beaver pelts in North America was a solid business idea.
- write a letter from George Simpson back to the HBC Head Office in England that describes what he has done in his visits to the trading posts.

Suggestions for expanding and extending students' learning

Students choose a topic to investigate and share their learning in a creative and interesting product.

- Investigate and report on beaver hat manufacture in England.
- Use a graphic organizer to display information on current day beaver populations in each province.
- Research alternate products used by First Nations before they had access to items listed on the Standard of Trade and display on posters with explanations for how the items were made and used.