



Inuit hunter from  
Frobisher Bay.  
Photo: Terry Macintosh

animal care, which is also in the farmers' interest. Only high standards of husbandry can produce the quality of fur required by today's highly competitive, international markets.

Fur farms also play an important environmental role. Wastes from the meat and fish processing industries provide feed for farmed mink and foxes. In addition to fur, these animals provide organic fertilisers, fine oils and other products, while supporting some 1500 farm families across the country.

#### A natural product

The fur trade makes one overwhelming contribution to conservation: well regulated, it uses a renewable Canadian resource, without

depleting wildlife species or harming the on-going productivity of nature.

The substitution of synthetics, by contrast, generally depends upon the use of petroleum-based non-renewable resources, which is not consistent with sustainable use of the environment.

The production of synthetics, moreover, involves chemical reactions at high temperatures, producing nitrogen oxides and releasing chlorine, mercury and other dangerous substances into the environment.

Some of the problems caused by the production of synthetics can be improved; for example, by reducing waste emissions. Similarly, the production of natural fibres, like cotton, might be improved by reducing the use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides.

But as biologist Barry Commoner has explained:

'what is at issue here is the fundamental point that even if all possible ecological improvements were made in the two processes, the natural one would still be more advantageous ecologically' (*The Closing Circle*, 1971).

Finally, unlike synthetics, furs are biodegradable. Produced through natural processes, they will be broken down in their turn to feed a new cycle of these same processes. As Commoner explains:

'for every polymer produced in nature by living things, there exist enzymes that have the specific capability of degrading that polymer... The contrast with synthetic fibres is striking... Ecologically, synthetic polymers are literally indestructible.'

#### Environmental lessons

The European exploration of North America in the 17th century was fuelled by a demand for beaver pelts, primarily for the manufacture of waterproof felt hats. The popularity of genuine beaver hats during this period was apparently encouraged by a belief that they would prevent deafness and memory lapses (perhaps by keeping the head warm and dry).

Today, when we are feeling the effects of our own environmental deafness and forgetfulness, the fur trade provides some important lessons about the responsible use of resources, while protecting our natural heritage for future generations.

#### About the author

Alan Herscovici is a Montreal writer specialising in social and environmental issues. His recent books include *Second Nature: The Animal-rights Controversy* (CBC Enterprises, Toronto and Montreal, 1985) and *Furs: An Environmental Ethic* (J Theilade, Copenhagen, 1989). His filmscripts include *An Ocean for Our Children* (1988), aired across the Arctic in Inuktitut by the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation, to introduce the Canadian Arctic Marine Conservation Strategy.

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