

shipping as many as 22,000 beaver skins a year from Canada to France. By 1743, the combined export by British and French fur-traders was in excess of 150,000 beaver pelts a year, as well as large numbers of other skins like marten, otter, and fisher.

The impact of the fur-trade was felt for more than three centuries. In pursuit of new and unexploited fur resources the traders moved ever deeper into the land, acquiring in the process geographical knowledge that prepared the way for detailed exploration and settlement. The Indians and Eskimos became willing participants in the trade and with the more efficient weapons they obtained in barter for their furs they developed into destroyers of wildlife almost as efficient as the white men with whom they dealt.

In fairness it should be stated that not all fur-traders were unaware of the need to conserve game resources. The Hudson's Bay Company, for example, sold only single-shot rifles to Indians, and imposed restrictions on their fur take when it became apparent that the beaver population was being depleted. Nor were all Indians and Eskimos eager to trap more animals than they required to barter for essential trade goods.

While the trade had a great effect on exploration and on economic and social development, its influence on the country's wildlife was far from salutary. Over-trapping was the vice of the fur-trade, and its effect first became evident in a large decline in the beaver population. But there were other human activities that caused even greater destruction.

Nineteenth Century Destruction

Agriculture, developing after the fur-trade, often upset the soil cover and the natural plant growth on which the wild animals depended, and destroyed the specialized ranges and habitats of many mammals and birds. A mentality that justified the extermination of wildlife on economic grounds alone dominated the continent in the first half of the nineteenth century. At least the fur-traders were practical businessmen, who realized that there were limits to the fur-bearing crop they harvested. No considerations of economics and common sense restricted the individuals who now seemed determined to destroy any wildlife species of value. They shot the buffalo for hides and tongues, wildfowl for the food market, birds with bright feathers for the milliners. The exploitation of wildlife that began with the fur-trade reached its climax in the slaughter of the last herds of plains bison late in the nineteenth century.

As the last loads of buffalo bones rolled eastward to be manufactured into fertilizer, a few thoughtful people took stock of the ravages that had been committed on nature's creatures by civilized man. It was a melancholy inventory. In less than 300 years, men had destroyed more than they could replace. Birds like the passenger pigeon, the auk, and the Labrador duck had been totally destroyed; many hoofed animals, such as the bighorn sheep, the antelope and the musk-ox, seemed destined to become curiosities like the buffalo; fur seals, whales and walrus had been depleted. Not only had men nearly wiped out many creatures: they had also invaded the natural homes of the mammals, frightening away some species by their presence and then burning or cutting the forests, diverting and fouling the streams, changing the face of the land until little refuge was left for the wildlife to recover in relative security.