

When Europeans first came to North America, they found natural resources plentiful beyond their imagination — deer, bear, elk, wild turkey and bison, duck, goose, passenger pigeon and other edible birds, dense forests, and rivers rich in fish. Although the first settlers probably overestimated the amount of wildlife, game and fish in large numbers were certainly available to people who had never before been able to hunt and fish without restriction.

Wildlife was free to all — no royal prerogatives or social distinctions inhibited a man's right to hunt and fish as he pleased. The resulting conception of wildlife as a resource for the use and enjoyment of all remains an essential part of the North American attitude to fish and game.

As the colonists began to clear and break the land and sow crops, wildlife, as well as the dense forest, became an impediment, if not a threat, to the establishment of stable, peaceful settlements. The impact of European settlements on North America's wildlife was apparent as early as the seventeenth century. The advance of agriculture inland from the eastern coast reduced the wildlife in many regions. Species that threatened human life or crops were slaughtered, while others were deprived of their habitats.

### *The fur trade*

The fur trade was of far-reaching significance in the uneasy relation between animal and man on the North American continent. It placed fur bearing animals at the mercy of a voracious commercial demand. The most eagerly sought-after animal, the beaver, was trapped relentlessly so European gentlemen might be properly hatted. Even in the early 1600s, the de Caens were shipping as many as 22,000 beaver skins a year from Canada to France. By 1743 British and French fur traders were exporting more than 150,000 beaver pelts a year, along with large numbers of skins such as 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 obtained in exchange for furs, they began to destroy wildlife almost as effectively as the white men with whom they dealt.

While the trade had a stimulating effect on exploration and on economic and social development, its influence