

Lessons for an environmental age

by ALAN HERSCOVICI

The fur trade played a central role in the development of Canada as a modern nation.

1990 marks 300 years since the Hudson Bay Company's Henry Kelsey explored Canada's western prairies – becoming the first white man to see the musk-ox and the buffalo.

Highways now trace routes used by the voyageurs, and many cities began as fur-trading posts. The need to facilitate financing for the trade prompted the establishment of the first bank (Bank of Montreal, 1817), and early contracts were often written on beaver pelts.

But the fur trade also carries an environmental message that has been 'field-tested' for hundreds of years. Montreal writer Alan Herscovici believes that the trade has important lessons for a world concerned about protecting our natural environment.

Above all, fur is still a versatile *natural* clothing material. Unlike synthetics, its production does not use up scarce resources or pollute. It does not destroy forests or deplete the ozone layer. In a society of mass-produced 'disposables' and overflowing landfills, fur garments are hand-crafted, long lasting and ultimately, completely biodegradable.

Management

The Canadian fur trade today is strictly regulated. Products from endangered or threatened populations are not used.

Trapping periods may vary from a few weeks to several months, depending on populations size, reproductive and survival rates and the carrying capacity of the land.

Canadian fur-bearers have not always been so well managed. By the end of the last century and as recently as the 1930's, overexploitation and destruction of habitat by logging, agriculture and the expansion of human settlements had significantly reduced fur-bearer numbers, completely eliminating some species in certain regions. It became clear that a more responsible approach was required.

The first systematic efforts to monitor wildlife populations (if only for business reasons) are found in records kept by employees of the Hudson's Bay Company, in the 18th and 19th centuries. The naturalist Ernest Thompson Seton used these records to plot graphically the periodic fluctuations of fur bearer populations in his classic *Life Histories of Northern Animals* (1909).

In Britain, Charles Elton of Oxford University published *Animal Ecology*, in 1924. The following year he became a consultant for the Hudson's Bay Company, investigating wildlife population cycles in Canada. The Hudson's Bay Company later provided funds for Elton to establish a Bureau of Animal Population, at Oxford.

The work of Elton and Canadian researchers like William Rowan of the University of Alberta, and J R Dymond of the University of Toronto, laid the groundwork for current fur-bearer management programmes. This cooperative effort by scientists, government and business anticipated the approach to environmental issues proposed by the recent World Commission on Environment and Development (*Our Common Future*, Oxford University Press, 1987).

Practicing conservationists

Today, Canadian trappers are licensed and the furs they sell are registered. In many regions, trappers receive exclusive harvesting rights in their territories, providing both the incentive and the means to assure long term, *sustainable* use of fur resources.

Much like a farmer or rancher, trappers cull some animals each year so that populations remain stable and healthy, at levels which can be supported by the land.

The populations of species most commonly used in the fur trade are now generally stable and abundant. Three prolific species (muskrat, beaver



ABOVE:
Northern Lights

BELOW:
Canada's 300th anniversary commemorative silver dollar depicts Henry Kelsey (acclaimed as the first white man to see buffalo) and a group of natives overlooking a vast herd, during his historic exploration of the Canadian prairies for the Hudson's Bay Company.



For most people, the fur trade conjures up romantic images of daring voyageurs, paddling canoes up wild rivers, into the heart of a vast new continent. Or the glamour of movie stars, emerging from limousines as long as locomotives, to display the latest designer creations...

But, behind the myths and marketing images, this historic endeavour makes important contributions to environmental conservation which deserve to be better understood today.

Wildlife and natural habitat are threatened around the world, by growing human populations, industrial activity and pollution.

In this generally gloomy picture, the fur trade is notable for the support it lends to (1) the *sustainable* use of wildlife, and (2) the protection of habitat.

The fur trade provides income for thousands of people in rural and remote parts of Canada – people who depend directly on nature and sound the alarm when habitat is threatened.