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Commission of Conservation  
Canada

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COMMITTEE ON FISHERIES, GAME AND  
FUR-BEARING ANIMALS

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**Conservation of  
the Fur Resources of  
Northern Canada**

BY

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*Dominion Entomologist and  
Consulting Zoologist*

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## Conservation of the Fur Resources of Northern Canada

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IN considering how we may conserve to the best advantage, that is, how we may use in such a manner as to prevent destruction or depletion, the different natural resources of the country, it is necessary to take stock of the available resources of different sections of the country. In some regions agriculture is the most important resource, in others forests, water-powers or mines may constitute the natural wealth. But, while the wild life of all parts of Canada forms an important natural resource, in northern Canada it is practically the only natural resource. On its continued existence in an unimpaired condition depend not only the lives of thousands of the native inhabitants of the country but the future economic development of that immense area, which would otherwise be devoid of available natural resources. Thousands of square miles are unsuitable for agriculture, the forest resources are, on the whole, not sufficiently extensive or accessible to permit successful exploitation, and the development of the mineral resources is not only full of difficulties but is also dependent on the presence of a native food supply.

Northern  
Fur-bearing  
Animals

On previous occasions I have addressed the Commission on certain aspects of the conservation of the wild life of the north, but I wish now to deal briefly with other problems to which we should devote, and I am pleased to say we are devoting, our earnest attention. I have already dealt with the conservation of the great natural supply of meat and clothing in the north, namely, the barren ground caribou, and with the musk-ox. Another important constituent of the northern wild life resources—the fur-bearing animals—demands our careful consideration.

It is unnecessary to emphasize the wealth of fur-bearing animals in the north, where the more important of these animals find an environment so eminently suited to them and to the production of high grade furs. Our fur-bearing animals were the first of our natural resources to lure to our shores the intrepid souls who braved every kind of danger in their quest for furs. The fur trade of the

Northwest Territories is not only the chief occupation of that immense area but it is the only means of livelihood and existence of the population. Unless the fur trade is maintained an enormous part of the Dominion would be rendered unproductive, and the native inhabitants would either starve to death or become a charge on the Government. That, in brief, is the significance of this problem.

As pioneers in the exploitation of the valuable fur resources of that vast north country, the Hudson's Bay Co., through its well-known posts, has conducted its trade in a manner that would ensure a constant supply of furs. Their trappers were mainly Indians and, to a lesser extent, Eskimos. The Indian trapper is a true conservationist as a rule, inasmuch as he will not, in a region in which he is working, completely exhaust its fur-bearing animals. The Hudson's Bay Co. officers encouraged provident methods, since it was a business necessity, as indeed are all conservation policies. With the advent of the "free trader," however, conditions were changed, and especially so when the foreign trader-trapper entered the country.

Foreign  
Trappers and  
Use of Poison

The foreign trapper and free trader has no interest in the future of the country. His sole object is to get as much out of it as possible while he is able. His policy is accordingly improvident. In trapping, the chief desire of such a trapper is to "clean up" a piece of territory and move on to another place. The measures he employs are usually as drastic as his policy. One of the worst features of the methods of these men is the use of poison. Ostensibly it is taken into the country for the destruction of wolves, but the real purpose is generally of a wider character, and its extensive use results in a wide distribution of the poison. It is very necessary that the use of poison in the north country should be very greatly restricted and its importation more closely watched and regulated.

Information has recently come into our hands that we are to experience a greater invasion of trappers and fur-traders from the United States than heretofore. Previous knowledge of their methods in Canada and in the United States and Alaska cannot but make one fearful for the future of our fur trade of the north; unless we are willing to sacrifice the only available resource of that north country, and to allow the inhabitants to be deprived of their chief and, in many cases, their only means of livelihood, measures will have to be taken to prevent a dangerous extension of the destructive activities of these foreign trappers and traders, who have, as I have said, no interest in the future of the country; their sole

desire is to enrich themselves and the firms they represent in the quickest manner possible, and this would be at the expense of our northern resources.

Revision of Northwest Game Act      At the present time the Northwest Game Act is undergoing a much needed revision, and we hope to be able to deal with this menace to the fur resources of the north. It is a question full of difficulties, but it is necessary that we overcome these if the Northwest Territories are to enjoy prosperity in the future. One thing is essential, namely, that some form of license system should be adopted. This would enable us to exercise a greater control over the operations of these trappers, whose activities affect the legitimate interests of the Indian trappers and other inhabitants and the operations of the older established Canadian companies, who are operating in a manner that will not jeopardize the future of our fur-bearing animals in the north.

It may be of interest to point out that the Danish Government administers the fur trade of Greenland as a government monopoly. State officers trade with the natives at so-called "buying-places." In this manner, and through their regulations regarding trapping, it is possible to exercise an amount of control that will ensure the conservation of the fur resources of Greenland to a far greater extent than is otherwise possible.

Greater control on the part of our government of the fur resources of the north is necessary, and I feel convinced, from the evidence we have of the destruction of fur-bearing animals in other regions, that unless such additional control is assumed, with the consequent exercise of greater precautions and foresight, the most valuable and available natural resources of that vast northern area will suffer irreparably.

With proper conservation, that is, utilization without excessive destruction or waste, the fur resources of the north would continue to provide means of livelihood for not only the present inhabitants, both white and native, but other Canadians too, and would furnish no inconsiderable portion of our national trade.

Natural Fluctuation in Fur Supply      The output of furs fluctuates, but inquiry has shown that these fluctuations are natural and due to phenomena which many species of wild life exhibit; increase and decrease alternate in fairly regular periods of years, and are due to the constant adjustment that goes on in nature of what is frequently called "the balance of nature."

The periodical fluctuations, which are well known to inhabitants of the Northwest, of such herbivorous animals as mice and rabbits, are accompanied by corresponding fluctuations of their predatory enemies, the carnivorous fur-bearing animals, such as weasels, lynx, foxes, etc. This biological phenomenon, however, is not so simple as it seems, and the biological relationships of the fur-bearing animals to the smaller animals that constitute their food, and the causes governing the periodical increases and decreases of the latter, afford problems of the greatest scientific interest and practical importance. Nevertheless, though in some years the numbers of fur-bearing animals, under natural conditions, may reach a low level, they usually recover and the number caught gradually reaches another high level. If, however, all the fur-bearing animals in a region are systematically and thoroughly exterminated, there can be no recovery. Wild life is irreplaceable once it is destroyed.

There is undoubtedly in Canada a future for fur-farming, provided such operations can be prevented from becoming the object of absurd stock market speculation. But such domestic furs cannot replace the wild furs.

**Forest Fires  
Destroy Ranges**

The total area in which fur-bearing animals can exist in Canada is gradually being diminished in the development of the country. Some of this diminution is unavoidable, but so far as one notable factor in the destruction of the range of fur-bearing animals is concerned, namely, the destruction of our forests by fire, it cannot be claimed to be unavoidable. And it is necessary that we should remember this aspect of the forest fire question, namely, its relation to the abundance of fur-bearing animals. Large areas of the northwest have become unproductive of furs owing to extensive forest fires.

But there are still large areas where the fur-bearing animals live their natural lives and where the surplus is removed by Indian and other local trappers. The supply of these animals will continue, provided they are properly conserved by preventing over-killing in any territory, and by the enforcement of the close seasons and the prohibition of any trade in unprime furs. We believe that this can be accomplished, and if this resource is wisely administered it will continue to render the far north a producing territory, and not the barren, unproductive region that many Canadians are accustomed to picture it, or into which the unrestricted destruction carried on by the foreign trapper would soon convert it.

