

PART II.—FURS

Section 1.—The Fur Industry*

The beaver, symbol of industry and engineering skill, has well earned his place on the Canadian Coat of Arms. A few years after the discovery of the North American Continent, beaver fur became a major product in the economy of the New World. Europeans recognized the value of beaver pelts for warmth and in the production of felt; North-American Indians recognized the value of metal implements in their economy. Under the dual stimuli, intensive hunting developed which soon depleted the resources of the coastal areas and traders moved up the St. Lawrence River to find new sources of supply. With increasing demand for furs from European markets, competition became very keen and frequently led to violence between rival nations. Continued competition in later years between the Northwest Company and the Hudson's Bay Company resulted in a further westward surge of exploration culminating in Sir Alexander Mackenzie's epic journeys to the Arctic and Pacific Oceans. Unfortunately, exploration gave way to exploitation. By the beginning of the twentieth century many fur species were faced with extinction and their declining numbers brought hardship to the trader and even greater hardship to the native peoples who had become dependent on the white man for the necessities of life.

However, about that time, major changes began to take place in the techniques of fur production. Fur farming, particularly of fox and mink, made its appearance. Mink ranching, coinciding with the present popularity of short-haired furs, has provided a large part of the revenue of the fur industry in recent years. Of greater importance has been the realization that fur-bearing animals are a renewable resource and that proper management can provide much greater returns. Legislation has therefore been passed by provincial governments and by the Federal Government sharply limiting the trapping pressure in the areas under their respective control. The establishment of National Parks and Game Sanctuaries has provided areas where animals may increase unmolested and repopulate formerly depleted areas. Intensive forest fire control and forest management have assured a continuous habitat suited to mammal needs.

One of the major management techniques developed has been the introduction of registered trapping areas. Under this plan, each trapper has some opportunity of managing his own area to provide the greatest possible return while sustaining the yield. With the guidance of conservation education, the trapper is taking his place as an interested partner in the maintenance and expansion of the fur industry.

Unfortunately, the possible benefit from the increase in potential fur production brought about by fur farming and intelligent harvesting methods has been largely nullified by declining prices. The decline in popularity of fur as an article of clothing has been particularly noticeable since the end of the War and low prices have brought considerable hardship to those people, particularly northern residents, who depend on the fur crop as a major source of income. In the light of this situation, the Federal Government has arranged a series of international exhibitions designed to stimulate the market for Canadian fur. Research to determine actual numbers and status of fur-bearers is being carried on by the provincial governments in the provinces and by the Canadian Wildlife Service in the Yukon and Northwest Territories, with the objective of improving management practices and maintaining closer control of fur harvests.

The relative value of the fur industry in Canada's economy has, of course, lowered continuously throughout the years, but the dollar value of the annual fur production has remained fairly constant.

* Prepared by the Canadian Wildlife Service, Department of Northern Affairs and National Resources, Ottawa.