

Objectives:

Students will be able to:

- understand the effects of the trapping industry on the environment
- develop and defend an argument based on facts regarding the pros and cons of trapping

Connection to Colorado Social Studies Standards:

- 4th grade: 1.1.b, 1.1.d, 2.2.c, 2.2.d

Materials: Access to internet or library resources; pencils/pens; writing paper; copies of “Journey of a Pelt” worksheet

Time: 1-2 class periods

Background

Many trappers found that if they joined together to form fur trade companies, they could make more money than they could on their own. The companies had a big effect on the fur trade in many ways. It was one company’s idea to have the rendezvous instead of forts for trading. Another company helped to drive foreign fur trade competition from the United States. Listed below are some of the major fur companies of the Rocky Mountain area:

Missouri Fur Company In 1807, Manuel Lisa led the first U.S. trapping expedition up the Missouri River. He found the areas so rich in beaver that only five years later he and the prominent Chouteau family from St. Louis set up the Missouri Fur Company. The company made a profit, but it didn’t do as well as many of the others.

American Fur Company Started in 1808 by John Jacob Astor, this company controlled the Great Lakes trade and then expanded to the Oregon area where Astor opened a new post, called Astoria. Astor became quite wealthy from the fur trade. He competed fiercely with the British companies such as the Hudson’s Bay Co., and finally convinced the U.S. Congress to pass an act saying that foreign fur companies could no longer trap in the United States.

Rocky Mountain Fur Company By the 1830s there were rumors that there was a lot of money to be made in the fur trade. Company after company was formed, but most were not well run, and they either fell apart or were taken over by the large, successful businesses. William H. Ashley started this company in 1822 when its first expedition left St. Louis and spent two years gathering beaver pelts. Many trappers whose names you might recognize worked for this company: Jim Bridger, Hugh Glass, Jedediah Smith, and William Sublette. Four years later, Ashley decided to sell the company to Jedediah Smith, William Sublette, and David Jackson, and they did well with it, though not as well as Ashley.

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St. Louis was the major collecting point for the furs trapped west of the Missouri River. From here, they were sent to New York by one of three ways:

1. By steamboat to New Orleans and then by sea to New York.
2. By steamboat up the Ohio River to Pittsburgh and then by barge on the Pennsylvania Canal to the coast
3. Up the Ohio River to Buffalo by the Ohio Canal and then on to the Erie Canal to New York.

The Rocky Mountain area started being trapped in the 1820s, but by the end of the 1830s there weren't many beaver left. Virtually every river valley had been explored and it wasn't uncommon for one company to bring in as many as sixty beavers in one morning. There was no way for the beavers to reproduce quickly enough to make up for such a loss in their numbers. In just twenty years, the trappers had killed almost all of them.

Just as fate would have it, though, at the same time the beaver supply ran out, the fashion in hats changed, and beaver fur was no longer needed. No one knows for sure just what caused the change in styles, but the common belief is that in 1840, a French duke lost his beaver top hat while traveling in China. And since there were no beavers available to use to make another hat, he had it made of silk, instead. When he got back home, the silk hat became the rage, and everyone wanted one of those instead of the old beaver type. The new silk hat brought the fur trade to an end.

Suggested Procedure:

1. Instructor will divide the class into thirds. One-third will be trappers in the 1830s. The second third will be environmentalists from the present. And the last third of the class will serve as judges for the debate.
2. The environmentalists and the trappers will debate the following topic: Should trapping be banned in the United States?
3. Each team will have one class period to research their point of view, and to plan their strategies for the debate. The last third who will be the judges will work on the "Journey of a Pelt" worksheet on the next page.
 - a. Don't forget to let the students (especially the trappers) know that they want to point out the benefits that come from their point of view.
4. During the next class period the two groups of students will debate the issue. The instructor will act as mediator during the debate.
5. The final third of the class will come to a decision based on the strength of the debaters' arguments; they will have a full class period to come to their decision. While they are deciding the other two-thirds of the class will work on the "Journey of a Pelt" worksheet. Once they have reached their conclusions, they will defend their decision to the rest of the class. The side with the most votes wins!
6. Teacher key to "Journey of a Pelt": 3, 10, 7, 12, 6, 8, 9, 4, 2, 5, 11, 1

Journey of a Pelt Worksheet

Name: _____

Date: _____

Instructions:

Listed below are all the steps that take place in trapping a beaver, from the mountain man just beginning his journey, to the products made from the fur. The steps below are not in the correct order, so read through them carefully, and re-number them in the correct order from first to last. (Hint: the first step is number 3)

- _____ The top hat purchased for his uncle is given back to the nephew for sentimental reasons when the uncle passes away. The year is 1848, and the nephew who now trades silk hats remembers when beaver hats were in fashion.
- _____ Hundreds of bundles of beaver and buffalo skins, along with salted buffalo tongues, arrive on schedule in St. Louis. Busy merchants prepare to ship them to New York for profits.
- _____ A trapper leaves his job as a St. Louis blacksmith to go west with a party of Rocky Mountain Fur Company employees. He will try his luck in the American fur trade.
- _____ The pelts are pressed flat and then bundled for shipping down the Missouri River on the steamboat Yellowstone.
- _____ The pelts make their long journey from the St. Louis merchants to New York “haberdashers” where hat makers clean the fur and make felt from it.
- _____ The beaver pelts are skinned and cleaned by the trapper with a Green River knife.
- _____ The trapper takes six traps down to a slower branch of the Green River and baits aspen sticks with castoreum scent.
- _____ The beaver skins are stretched and tied with willow hoops for curing.
- _____ The trapper trades his cured pelts at Fort Union for two Green River knives, one axe, a pound of coffee, and a pint of watered-down whiskey.
- _____ The trapper mixes up his own special recipe of castoreum and stores it in a small wooden box he bought in St. Louis.
- _____ Beaver “toppers” are shipped to the coast of France where a merchant buys one of the finest for his favorite uncle.
- _____ The trapper returns to the stream to check the traps he set yesterday. He is happy to find that four of the six traps have caught beaver.