

Case Studies – Europeans in Canada

1. A Major Problem in New France

The coureurs des bois gave alcohol to First Nations in exchange for their furs. Alcohol increased their profits. The colony was divided into two camps: those who supported the trade in alcohol with First Nations and those who denounced it as dishonorable. Alcohol had a devastating effect on those who believed in illusions and spirits. Francois de Laval, Bishop of Quebec, described the effects in his Pastoral Letter of February 24, 1662:

“The village or the cabin where savages drink is an image of hell: fire is flickering about on all sides: they hack away with axes and knives, spilling blood everywhere; everywhere are heard dreadful yells and howling. They are at each other’s throats; they rip each others’ ears off. The father and mother throw their little children onto hot coals or into boiling cauldrons.”

As problems increased, First Nations demanded that the traffic in spirits be stopped, and Francois de Laval issued a threat of excommunication to French who were giving alcohol to the First Nations:

“Since we are obliged by the duties of our position to oppose with all our power this flood of disorder, we hereby proclaim the excommunication of all those who give, in whatever manner, intoxicating drinks to the savages, unless it be one or two cups per day of the ordinary little measure that is given to French laborers, in other words, two small shots of spirits per day.”

But commercial competition won out over good intentions. The alcohol trade became so poorly regulated that the King ordered Governor Frontenac to summon twenty of the most important merchants in the colony to increase the sale of alcohol to First Nations. The majority of the merchants were in favour of the trade in spirits, with no restrictions:

“Frenchman unworthy of the name derive huge profits from this disgraceful commerce, because once they have intoxicated the savages, they strip off their clothes, their weapons and anything else they may have sold them beforehand. Some Frenchman have admitted to getting 15 000 livres worth of beaver skins out of a single barrel of spirits worth no more than 200 livres.”

Imagine you are the Governor of New France. The King has asked you to find a way to stop the alcohol trade between the First Nations and the fur traders. Create a set of laws, regulations and possible fines or punishments to stop this problem.

2. Beaver, Bison and Cod – North American Wildlife

The history of the beaver, bison and cod in North America are examples of how the complex interactions between agrarian/industrial European society and hunter-gatherer/horticultural First Nations societies resulted in severe overexploitation of wildlife. European settlers were driven by the demands for North American animal products in Europe. As a result of their need to repay ship owners who provided transportation and supplies to settlements, Europeans used the new environment to find natural resources that they could ship to Europe and sell. These resources included salted fish, furs, timber, or any other product that was scarce in Europe. The western worldview of the time saw land and resources as free for the taking (we've already talked about this). Natural resources were abundant in North America at the time, in part because the relatively small hunter-gather populations of First Nations had no need to exploit them.

In most hunting and gathering societies, the animal belongs to the one who kills it. In European society, wildlife and hunting was reserved for owners of land. When Europeans "bought" land from First Nations, the First Nations thought they were merely sharing the land with Europeans. Europeans assumed they bought and owned the land and everything on it, regardless of how the land might be used. These differences caused repeated conflict and still do. This can be seen in the history of beaver trapping, bison killing and overfishing of cod.

The Beaver Trade

The hunting of beaver had massive ecological and social impact throughout the range of the beaver in North America. Earlier, Native Americans had little incentive to kill more animals than they needed. By 1640, the beaver numbers had declined in many areas of eastern North America. By the end of the 17th century, the beaver trade was dead in New England. In other parts of North America the fur trade, with beaver as the main commodity, continued through the 18th century. As one area was trapped out, hunters and trappers moved farther inland, especially the interior of Canada. By the end of the 18th century, the fur trade was no longer profitable, in large part because beaver and other fur bearing animals had become extremely scarce across North America. By the time the beaver trade collapsed, many First Nation communities were changed beyond recognition. Instead of producing most of the goods necessary for survival, they hunted and trapped fur-bearing animals and sold all the pelts. They often became dependent upon European trade goods such as blankets, fabrics and food. This cycle eventually led to the sale of land to Europeans.

The ecological consequences of the beaver trade were wide ranging because beaver are a *keystone species*. We talked about this during "Elder in the Making", a keystone species is a species upon which many other species depend for their survival, and thus are crucial for maintaining biodiversity. Keystone species often benefit the other species in the community by altering the physical structure of the environment in a way that creates a habitat for other species. Beaver are large rodents that form dams in streams and rivers, creating large, slow moving pools where there was rapidly running water before. These pools are important habitats for many fish, amphibians and invertebrates. Slowing the water also causes nutrients and sediments to settle out in the beaver ponds, rather than washing down stream. This greatly

increases the nutrient richness of the streams and thereby the insect food base to bats, birds and other wildlife. The collapse of the beaver may have led to a decline in some elk populations and also possibly a decline in wolf populations in some areas due to the loss of their backup food source and habitat for their preferred prey, elk. The combination of decline in the value of beaver pelts and the protection of beaver in much of North America has resulted in a recovery of many beaver populations. The 20th century saw an explosion in beaver populations densities similar to pre-European numbers. A dramatic change in the landscape was seen as beaver rapidly re-created ponds and bogs. Unfortunately beaver continue to be regarded as pests in some urban areas as they block culverts with dams, flood roads and parks, and cut down trees along river walks and in residential areas. In the absence of natural predators and trappers to control population, beaver continue to be a problem in many areas.

You are a Calgary city councilor and have been assigned the task of dealing with the devastation the beaver have caused along the Bow River pathway and neighbourhoods adjacent to the Bow River. Devise a plan that will protect the beaver, yet stop the destruction of trees in parks and residential areas along the river. You must also look at ways to stop the beaver from blocking culverts and coming up with a solution to the flooding their dams are causing downtown.

3. The End of the Bison

By the end of the 17th century the westward expansion of European settlers had begun in North America. Many of these settlers had a belief that the First Nations peoples had to give up their territory because they had no use for it except hunting, gathering and fishing. The market-driven demand for buffalo hides was likely the ultimate driving force behind the near extinction of the buffalo. Another contributing factor was European settlers and adventurers shooting buffalo on a large scale for enjoyment and sport. The disappearance of bison had a major impact on First Nations. By the early 1880's, First Nations could no longer find buffalo in the numbers required to sustain themselves. Many moved to the trading posts and took up a semi-sedentary way of life, thus putting themselves at greater risk for epidemic diseases. With their livelihood gone, they became increasingly dependent upon imported European goods and foods.

Samuel Walking Coyote rescued eight orphan calves, which grew into a small herd he eventually sold to some ranchers interested in buffalo. This herd became the source of animals used to re-establish buffalo in parts of Canada. There are now populations across the prairies and Rocky Mountains. There is more interest in buffalo as a source of lean meat and as an animal naturally adapted to living in the harsh and variable conditions present in western grasslands. Some conservation groups would like to re-establish grassland over millions of acres of depleted land and re-establishing large herds of buffalo as a wild crop.

You are an MLA for the district of Rockyview. The Premier of Alberta has asked you to reintroduce a large herd of buffalo to the plains region north and east of Calgary. You have to figure out a way to ensure that the buffalo do not become a nuisance to the citizens of Calgary, Airdrie, Cochrane and Chestermere. You must make sure that the buffalo do not cause traffic issues on Queen Elizabeth Highway, Highway 1A and the Trans-Canada Highway. You must also negotiate with ranchers and farmers that own the land you're going to need for the buffalo to roam.

4. Collapse of Cod Stocks off Newfoundland's Coast

In 1497 the English explorer John Cabot sailed through the waters off the coast of Newfoundland and was astounded at the incredible number of cod, which surrounded his ship (remember the really bad video we watched). Many other countries, such as France, Spain and Portugal joined in the fishing banks for the summer seasons and established summer bases to salt and process the fish.

For a very long time, the cod fishery had been balanced and sustainable when conducted by First Nations in the area. Europeans had a different understanding of ownership and land usage and after they arrived, the motivation for fishing changed.

The Northern Cod were so plentiful that until the late 1950's over 250 000 tons were caught on an annual basis. The arrival of large factory ships from other countries hailed the first onslaught to the finely balanced renewable cod fishery. These factory trawlers were huge ships, which would use enormous haul nets to capture large numbers of cod, flatfish, haddock, herring and many other fish. They came from England, the U.S., the Soviet Union, Germany, Spain, Portugal, Poland, Japan and Korea.

The process allowed the trawlers to lay out their nets, from the stern of the ships, haul them in and then process the fish on the ship by gutting, cleaning and freezing the fish. With the arrival of these foreign fleets and the huge increase in their ability to net the fish, the annual catch in 1968 increased to over 800 000 tons. At this level, the cod were not able to renew their numbers and their population began to decline so by 1975 the annual catch had reached 300 000 tons. The U.S. and Canada took action by extending their marine jurisdiction to 200 nautical miles, which pushed foreign factory ships off many of the prime fishing grounds. The catches continued to decline for many years and bottomed at 139 000 tons in 1978. If the fishery were maintained at this level then the recovery and health of the cod may have occurred, but Canadian factory ships replaced foreign ones and did not allow the cod population time to recover.

The fishing technology had also taken another destructive leap with the use of draggers. These ships dropped huge nets that were dragged along the bottom of the ocean, which caught everything in their path and destroyed the underlying ecosystem. Fish and other sea life, including the food source for the cod were all being destroyed to keep the catch rate high. The entire ecosystem was destabilized and much of the cod that were caught were spawning and so the reproductive cycle was also disrupted.

The impact of this highly destructive process was the main reason for the drop in normal patterns of the cod and the shrinkage in their overall numbers. In 1988 it was recommended that the allowable catch be cut in half. The government at the time put off any real action until 1992 when the Federal Minister of Fisheries and Oceans was forced to impose a ban on fishing Northern cod. The cod fishery completely collapsed and by 1995 it was estimated that the entire cod biomass had declined to around 1700 tons from the annual yearly catch in the mid 50's of 250 000 tons.

For over 400 years the cod fishery had been one of the richest in the world and by 1992 it had almost been completely eliminated. The Department of Fisheries estimated that even if the stock began an immediate recovery with no fishing, it would take 15 years before fishing could be reestablished. Over 42 000 people in the industry were out of work. This spelt the end of many smaller communities in Newfoundland that had been dependent on the fisheries.

You are the Minister of Fisheries for the government of Canada. You and your department are about to reintroduce commercial fishing off the Grand Banks of Newfoundland. You must ensure that another collapse of the cod stock does not occur or you will lose your job. Develop a set of measures, rules and regulations for Canadian and European fishing fleets to keep this resource viable for future generations.