

# Native People and the Fur Trade

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## Introduction

Native people are not destroyers of the earth. We do not kill our animal brothers for joy or for money. Some who have strayed from the sacred fire will return and with our animal brothers the eighth and final fire will be kindled. This is the reason for the Native/Animal Brotherhood.

The time has come for native people to speak up concerning our traditional feelings towards our animal brothers. No longer can mother earth afford the distortions of economics upon the native spirit.

It was because of the fur trade that we strayed from our traditional way of life. Now the Canadian government and the international fur industry are using the plight of the native people to ensure the survival of the fur industry, not the survival of native people. They have distorted history in order to save an industry which kills our brothers: an industry which doesn't profit native people.

The following is a history of how our way of life changed with the arrival of the first European fur traders.

## The Fur Trade Gave Us Reserves

Before the arrival of the Europeans most natives were nomadic, traveling from place to place to get food, medicines and other materials or to travel to sacred grounds. When the Europeans invaded this continent they discovered a people very linked to the earth and to the creatures of the earth.

The first contacts for many native people with the Europeans were encounters with representatives of the newly formed Hudson's Bay Company. The Company consisted of men interested in the Indians as a cheap source of labor to line their own pockets. Their chief interest was to acquire the skins of small animals, which natives do not traditionally use for food; after all, who would take the trouble to sew together a lot of small skins to make clothing when the skin of one large animal would do the same duty with only one life lost and less effort expended?

To facilitate the trade in furs and to meet the increasing demand for furs, the Hudson Bay Company set up a fort at Churchill, Manitoba. Soon this style of trade became too slow and inadequate to meet the growing European demand for beaver. Also, competition from the Northwest Company became even more of a threat. The remaining Indians who were dropping off excess furs could no longer supply the demand, specifically for beaver. The only way to increase the



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output of the Indians was to teach them a new way to gather fur - trapping. This method of capturing an animal was foreign to the Indians as trapping is an activity that demands settling in one place so you can set the traps and return periodically to collect your catch. A nomadic people, when it must kill, hunts or snares the animal. The Europeans changed this process into production line killing.

As the Indians were now forced to settle in specific places, the European traders had to follow with their suppliers into the interior in order to support this new way of life. Hot on the trail of which were the settlers who benefited most from the settlement of the Indians. Now the way was clear to keep the Indians in one place, to corral and to segregate them from their land so that settlement could go more smoothly. While for the Indians, the same areas they had settled in became their prisons, their reservations.

### **The Fur Trade Separated the Elders from the Young**

As the demand grew for more furs, specifically beaver furs, a rift developed between the natives trading with the Europeans and the natives who wished to hold with the traditional ways. The rift between "modernists" and "traditionalists" still exists today. At that time it was the elders who held to the old ways: now it is the young, the seventh fire that wishes to rekindle the strength and spirit of our ancestors. Only through respect for our animal brothers can we hope to regain the knowledge and wisdom that was once the heart of our people.

### **Fur and Prejudice**

The fur trade is the most insidious source of prejudice against native peoples. The Fur Institute of Canada and the government drag token Indians all over Europe to get support for the white trapping and fashion fur industry as if natives were some sort of noble gods. In contrast, back at home, they cut education programs that could get natives out of subsistence jobs like fur trapping. Europeans on the other hand are suddenly all concerned about native people (possibly because they got us into this mess in the first place) and refuse to pass any laws that might cost one native his job. I wonder if they show the same concern for white coal miners or steel workers as they do natives or is their skin the wrong color for sympathy.

Natives are an oppressed people with an unique and threatened culture but, we are no better or worse than any other people and do not wish to be treated as such and do not wish to be treated as though we are special when it serves certain corporate interests while treaties are broken, or ignored, and while our people suffer so badly from the results of three centuries of servitude and dependence.

### **Animals. Dead Animals and Natives**

Not all native people are alike. Amongst many tribes and cultures many different ideas and political systems exist. To say that natives believe something is akin to saying Asians believe one thing. With this in mind there is one common theme amongst native peoples, and that is a respect for their animal brothers.

When a native is forced to kill one of his animal brothers this respect is foremost in his mind. Being forced to kill is an act distasteful to any of us and to kill for such little reason as to make a fur coat is horrible indeed. Fashion fur is not a native way. You don't see many people hanging around a reserve in a fur coat. Native tradition is to kill economically, causing fewest deaths and gaining most products from one death. Therefore no traditional native would dream of killing forty little animals to create a piece of clothing one large animal would give them. Useless death was a foreign concept to us. Another useful gift from the Europeans (like smallpox).

### **The Seventh Fire**

We have been told by our prophets that there will be difficult times for the people of the First Nations. These are the times. Our brothers on the earth are being slaughtered, we see the mistreatment of our people in the courts, cut backs in funding for education, and Mother Earth is being smothered by pollution. But we must not be discouraged or despairing because these trials only serve to make our nations stronger and our people more determined.

This is the prophecy of the Ojibway Ottawa and Potawatomi nations....

In the time of the seventh fire a new people will emerge, to retrace their steps and history to find what was left by the trail. Their steps will lead them to many different places and to

teachers and elders of their nations, but many of the elders will have fallen asleep and will have forgotten, or never learned, the teachings of some elders and historians will be silent out of fear and ignorance. Many more will be overlooked and nothing asked of them... Their task is not easy, It will take time, perseverance, and faith. The new people must remain strong in their quest...there will be a rebirth of the Anishinabe nation and a rekindling of the sacred fire which will light the eighth and final fire...of eternal peace, understanding and acceptance over the entire world.

We the seventh fire must return to the old ways, reunite with our animal brothers so we may yet light the eighth fire.

#### **Conclusion**

The fur industry took us away from our traditional ways. It is time that we reunited with our animal brothers, to seek a world which respects Mother Earth and all beings.

