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FUR RESOURCES--THE STEPCHILD OF CONSERVATION

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If the public does not believe that ducks are just about the most important species of wildlife, it is not the duck hunters' fault. That more attention is being given to ducks than to any other form of wildlife is a fact that cannot be denied. More power to all those who are interested in duck conservation. The migratory waterfowl surely need it.

But what about fur animals? Who is looking after their welfare? This tremendously valuable natural resource is being constantly neglected and shoved into the background and still remains the stepchild in the family of conservation. As a matter of fact, it looks now as though we are headed straight for a general extermination of fur animals--not because we want it, but because we can't help it under the present system.

It is difficult to conceive that in a civilized country so valuable a resource as fur animals has been so sadly neglected and atrociously wasted. You can't go on killing millions of fur animals forever without eventually coming face to face with their extermination. Surely a valuable resource that yields an annual income to trappers of \$65,000,000 deserves much more attention than it is now receiving. A large majority of those who trap fur animals includes farmers and their sons who depend upon this source of revenue to increase the farm income. The employment it furnishes and the income it supplies to these rural folks should be sufficient justification to arouse public sentiment for immediate action in order to save what is still left of our fur resources.

We like to think of ourselves as ardent conservationists, far-seeing, and possessing the required initiative--but somehow or other we have come to believe that we can treat our fur animal heritage as we please. Even some of those who have served as administrators of wildlife have seemed to forget that they are custodians not owners of our fur resources. How long will this continue before we realize that there is something fundamentally wrong with such an attitude? Fur animals are the property of the people in the various States, and this natural resource should be managed for the benefit of all the people instead of permitting political groups and selfish interests to exploit it.

Many fine meadows in the United States had their origin in the industry of the beaver, which built dams, cleared away trees, and when its artificial lakes were finally filled with silt, removed to other localities. Fur bearers have been greatly reduced in numbers before the advance of civilization, which drove the animals from their haunts and converted the areas to agricultural uses.

It is quite generally believed by those who are struggling with our Federal land policies that too much agricultural land has been developed, yet they have failed to see that a considerable portion of our public and private land should be utilized for the production and conservation of this valuable natural resource.

There are those who visualize a swamp or marsh as a place that must be drained. Others believe that such areas serve the best purpose as a dump for defunct automobile bodies. Yet many such places are havens for muskrats and other fur animals, as well as for migratory waterfowl. Some of our tidal and inland marsh areas are capable of producing five, sometimes more, muskrats per acre, not to mention the other wildlife which inhabits such places. At present market prices, the return on an acre from muskrat pelts alone would furnish an income of from \$7 to \$14 each season. No system of cropping this type of land would produce as much. Why then is serious consideration not given to fur animals as an annual crop? Animals as well as human beings derive their very existence from the land. They are fed, sheltered, clothed, and warmed out of the soil. The land then should mean something more than just so many bales of cotton, so many bushels of corn, or so many pounds of pork. Wildlife, one of our greatest natural heritages, deserves serious consideration in any general policy for land management.

Every year millions of acres are being destroyed for wildlife uses by forest fire, soil erosion, and by plowing large sections of land that never should be plowed. Recently on a trip to the Pacific coast I saw in one of the Southwestern States large areas plowed for the first time, and bordering these areas were clumps of large pine trees girdled to make room for more cultivated crops. What a pity to destroy such natural wildlife areas for the purpose of producing crops, when there are already millions of acres of waste land that was once productive.

The same neglect that has caused the extermination of the passenger pigeon and the decimation of the buffalo herds, and that has brought the migratory waterfowl population to a crisis, is bringing fur animals there just as fast. Over-production of fur seldom, if ever, occurs these days.

If demand for certain species grows, naturally the catch is increased; and if some furs are neglected in the trade, the reverse is true. A strong demand for a particular kind of fur causes continued trapping, which if pursued long enough will reduce the number below commercial quantities and may eventually exterminate the animal. Continued increase in the number of fur animals trapped does not mean that the animals have increased in numbers. On the contrary it most likely is an indication that the species in question is being threatened with extermination.

The marten, fisher, and otter, our three most valuable fur animals from the standpoint of individual pelts, are in just such a precarious status. The price obtained from these pelts has always remained high enough to cause close trapping. The animals, although never abundant anywhere, have now entirely disappeared from much of their former range. Of these three, the otter is perhaps most plentiful because much skill and patience are required to locate its haunts and capture it.

To develop young, the female marten requires 9 1/2 months and the fisher 11 months. The whelping seasons of the marten and of the fisher are late in March and early in April. Consequently, in States where these animals are permitted to be trapped, pregnant females are sure to be destroyed. Extermination of these species is therefore most seriously threatened. Unless we do something about it, their extinction is inevitable.

The Russian Government, in view of the growing scarcity of the Russian sable, prohibited the taking of this animal in Asiatic Russia from February 1913 to October 1916. This action naturally increased the demand at that time for American marten, and as a result the animal was so closely trapped that the breeding stock was seriously impaired. The breeding and gestation periods of the American marten and the Russian sable were not then known; but the Russians, always fur conscious, took this precautionary measure to prevent further depletion of their breeding stocks.

The most amazing thing is that with a \$500,000,000 annual turnover in the retail fur trade even as late as 1929, no one should have started long ago to put the fur trade on a factual basis. No one knows whether we produce 12,000,000 muskrats a year and trap 13,000,000, or whether we produce 11,000,000 and trap 26,000,000. How many of the different species are produced and how many killed annually is obviously the first thing to determine in looking to the future trapping of fur animals. Already the annual retail turnover in furs has shrunk to \$150,000,000, and the entire cause cannot be attributed to draughts, floods, and the financial depression. A considerable portion of it has been caused by an increasing scarcity of fur animals.

Has any policy been adopted for the conservation of fur resources? Is there a national plan for the maintenance and preservation of the tremendous economic value in fur resources? The trouble is the public has been extremely indifferent to fur conservation, forgetting that this natural resource had a great deal to do with the development of our country. Even among the State conservation and game commissions there are those who look upon fur animals as "vermin," simply because some of them feed on species of game birds that hunters desire to shoot for sport. There seems to be no policy of "live and let live" where the fur animals are concerned.

The fur trade would do well to face this situation. There is no other group of people to whom the preservation of our fur resources mean so much. As Mr. Darling has told the duck hunters: "Better think soberly in terms of preservation rather than of postmortems."

Now, what can be done? Well, here is a suggestion: If the fur trade were represented by an organization similar to those maintained by

other large and important industries to look after their interests, its spokesmen could present the situation and gain the recognition for a natural resource on which the trade's very existence depends. And here's another hint: It is not yet too late for the fur trade to inform the National Resources Board that fur animals should be given serious consideration in evolving a national policy for the use of our resources.

Perhaps no other nation and surely no other continent in history was given so much to begin with in the way of fur resources; and perhaps no other people has treated this natural heritage with so little concern for its value to future generations. What of the future? Will the people of the United States take more active interest in conserving a resource that really belongs to them? Will the fur trade urge upon local, State, and Federal governments the necessity for developing and fostering a new and constructive policy so that our fur resources will be conserved rather than ruthlessly exploited? Will the fur trade cooperate in formulating and in carrying out such a policy? These are important questions. If the fur animals are to have a fair break and the fur trade is to be maintained, something must be done and done quickly.