



Wild Illinois History

www.wildillinois.org

Trappers Then and Now

Concept:

Modern trappers are much different today than trappers like Toussaint Bouchard who paddled his canoe along rivers and streams of the Illinois Territory. This exercise helps students examine differences and similarities in the historic and modern approaches to and beliefs about wildlife and trapping. Students can discuss what life was like for Toussaint Bouchard in the 1800s and how his life would be different as a trapper today.

Objectives:

Students will be able to:

- Compare trappers of the Illinois Territory to today's trappers
- Understand how furbearers such as beaver became overharvested
- Understand the current rules and regulations that govern trappers' behavior
- Identify how trappers contribute to wildlife conservation in modern Illinois

Standards Addressed:

- 13.B.2f Analyze how specific personal and societal choices that people make affect local, regional and global ecosystems
- 16.E.2a Identify environmental factors that drew settlers to the state and region
- 16.E.2c Describe environmental factors that influenced the development of transportation and trade in Illinois
- 17C.2c Explain how human activity affects the environment

Materials:

- Access to Internet
- Poster board or other presentation materials

Space:

Classroom

Key Points:

- The need of people to make a living -- and the nation to earn funds through trade – prompted early Americans to harvest all the beaver they could find.
- With lack of wildlife regulations, there were no limits on how many beavers could be harvested. Modern wildlife conservation science and regulations keep beaver populations in healthy numbers.
- Without a conservation ethic, people didn't care or couldn't see how their individual trapping activities could damage beaver populations.
- Today, hunters and trappers work hand-in-hand with Illinois DNR and other agencies and organizations to manage wildlife properly and support wildlife conservation through their time, efforts and financial support.

Educator Background:

The practice of trapping and concepts of the importance of wildlife have changed in very real and important ways since Toussaint Bouchard's time in the early 1800s. The beliefs, behaviors and practices of trappers, the public and government have changed radically in the last 200 years. The beliefs and motivations that propelled Toussaint Bouchard and other trappers are very different from how trappers are today.

With the popularity of beaver skins in Europe to make hats prior to the 1830s, beavers were hunted and trapped until they almost were eliminated from Illinois. Today beavers are abundant in Illinois, thanks to the efforts of the Illinois Department of Natural Resources and the efforts of hunters and trappers throughout Illinois.

Trapping in the Early 1800s

Trapping was profitable: Trapping was hard and dangerous work. Many trappers died through accidents or hostile encounters with Native Americans and other trappers. But profits were often very high, so there were many willing trappers. Most fur trappers made their living full time by harvesting beavers and other furbearing wildlife.

Government encouragement: The U.S. government led by President Thomas Jefferson encouraged trappers and fur trading companies to trap as many furbearers as possible. The young country needed money, goods and relationships with other countries that could be generated by trade. The United States saw immediate and huge profits in the fur trade. Their goal was to out-compete other countries that established trading posts within adjacent areas such as the Illinois Territory that were not yet part of the United States.

No hunting or trapping regulation: Hunting and trapping activities were not regulated in any way by the U.S. government. No wildlife agencies existed on the state or federal level to oversee the welfare of wildlife populations. Wildlife management – the use of scientific research and principles to actively manage wildlife populations – did not yet exist. Trappers were given free rein and encouragement to trap all the species that they wanted.

Harvesting anytime, anywhere: Most furbearer pelts were harvested in the winter months – long after wildlife has reared its young for the year -- when the furs are in the highest, plushest, thickest condition. However, beavers were in high demand to make hats made from felt (a process that uses the dense undercoat of a beaver’s pelt to be chemically treated and processed in a way that makes a stiff, thatched mat for forming into hats), and because felt does not require high quality furs to make it, trappers could harvest beaver year-round. This practice made it hard for mother beavers and kits (beaver young) to survive. If a mother beaver were harvested while her young still depended on her, the kits wouldn’t be able to make it on their own.

Trappers in Toussaint Bouchard’s time also could take beaver and other furbearers using the most convenient manner possible. Early trappers and Indians used any method possible to capture furbearers, including netting, snaring, shooting, deadfalls, dogs, draining ponds, and destroying dens and lodges.

How furbearers were harvested: Some early trappers used steel traps with teeth, but these traps were expensive and hard to come by. Each trap was individually made, which means they were slowly produced and expensive to buy. By 1823, near the end of the fur trade era, steel traps were produced with interchangeable parts, and traps became much more affordable.

Exhausting one area, moving to another: Trappers and fur trading companies were first established in the Eastern United States. As early trappers harvested beaver and other furbearer populations to near extinction, they moved to territories further west, reaching the Illinois Territory in the early 1800s, to continue making a living through trapping. Finally as many beaver populations neared depletion the lower territories, trappers turned their attention to Canadian territories.

End of an era: By 1842, the mountain man and trapper era ended and the fur trade collapsed when the American Fur Company went out of business. Silk hats had become the rage in Europe, and people were no longer interested in wearing beaver hats. By this time, beaver populations had been harvested past a point where they could meet any serious demand for pelts.

Why wildlife took a hit: By reading this passage, it's easy to think that trappers were just greedy people. The truth is that there were many factors that allowed beavers to be overpopulated. There was no regulation of beaver populations in the United States. State and federal agencies did not exist to manage wildlife and natural resources until the turn of the 20th century. Conservation organizations led by concerned citizens began at about the same time. Trappers and fur trading companies were encouraged to take all the furbearers they could, by any manner they could, and that encouragement came from the United States government.

Finally, there was no "conservation ethic". In the early days of the United States, many people believed that wilderness was largely evil, and needed to be tamed by people. Many people believed that natural resources existed simply to be used and consumed by people. And because the United States was so plentiful in natural resources, people believed they could use as much as they wanted without creating any negative consequences. Nobody at that time thought differently, and trappers acted on those perceptions as well.

Many trappers were poor people trying to make a living. They believed that if they didn't harvest the resources first, then someone else would. They were right about that, since no system existed to manage individual's actions toward natural resources. In the late 1800s and early 1900s national leaders such as Theodore Roosevelt, John Muir and Aldo Leopold began to champion wildlife and natural resources. They believed that natural resources should be protected and conserved for the good of future generations. But it took the near demise of the beavers and buffalos, as well as the extinction of passenger pigeons for people to see that nothing exists in inexhaustible supply.

Modern trappers

To learn more about modern trappers, visit the Fur Hunting and Trapping in Illinois website at <http://dnr.state.il.us/orc/wildlife/>. This website focuses specifically on regulated hunting and trapping as beneficial ways to manage Illinois furbearers. Regulated hunting and trapping play important roles in the ecology and conservation of Illinois' furbearers--mammals that are hunted and trapped primarily for fur.

Illinois Department of Natural Resources manages and regulates hunting and trapping. DNR ensures that these activities are safe, efficient and practical. In this manner, hunting and trapping provide recreational and economic opportunities for Illinois residents while helping to maintain a balance between the needs of people and wildlife.

This website supports the following information about hunting and trapping in Illinois:

1. **Hunting and trapping are highly regulated.**
Hunting and trapping are controlled through strict, scientifically based regulations. These regulations are enforced by Illinois state conservation police officers.
2. **Hunting and trapping are allowed only for abundant wildlife.**
Regulated hunting and trapping do not cause wildlife to become endangered.
3. **Hunting and trapping benefit people and ecology.**
Regulated hunting and trapping provide many benefits to society, especially to maintain a balance between wildlife and people.
4. **Hunting and trapping are as humane as possible.**
Illinois DNR continually reviews and develops rules, regulations and education programs to ensure that hunting and trapping are as humane as possible.
5. **Hunters and trappers care about wildlife.**
Hunters and trappers support wildlife laws and regulations because they care about the welfare of wildlife. Through license fees and special taxes, they contribute more than \$16 million annually to help pay for Illinois wildlife conservation. These contributions benefit everyone who enjoys nature.

Procedures:

Using Toussaint Bouchard as an example, students can discuss what life was like for Bouchard in the 1800s and how his life would be different today.

The classroom will break into five groups. Each group will present information from one of the five main points above from the Fur Hunting and Trapping in Illinois website. They can break down main topics within each section, so that each student has a topic to research and report on to and for the group. Or students can work more through group participation techniques.

The students' goal is to research and discuss what the current hunting and trapping practices are for furbearers in Illinois today. They then should compare hunting and trapping in Toussaint Bouchard's time.

Students can prepare posters or give group presentations on how modern hunting and trapping differs from practices in the 1800s.

Questions:

1. How are hunting and trapping different today than in the early 1800s?
2. How do hunters and trappers think differently about wildlife today? What ideas are in place now that weren't known in the 1830s?
3. What state and federal wildlife agencies are devoted to wildlife conservation? When did they exist and how did they get started?
4. What hunting and trapping regulations exist today? Name two regulations and determine how those regulations might have helped beaver populations survive in the Illinois Territory.
5. How do hunters and trappers help wildlife through their activities?
6. How do citizens practice hunting and trapping today compared to how Toussaint Bouchard might have practiced these activities? Why are they different now?

Sources of information:

- Fur Hunting and Trapping in Illinois website:
<http://dnr.state.il.us/orc/wildlife/index.htm>
- Fur Hunting and Trapping in Illinois/ Related Links:
<http://dnr.state.il.us/orc/wildlife/links.htm>
- Fur Hunting and Trapping in Illinois/ Publications:
http://dnr.state.il.us/orc/wildlife/virtual_news/publications.htm
- For information on how hunters and trappers contribute to wildlife and conservation, go to Fur Hunting and Trapping in Illinois / Virtual Newsroom
http://dnr.state.il.us/orc/wildlife/virtual_news/index.htm
- For another historical perspective on trappers and the fur trade, as well as a description of trappers in today's world, go to:
http://www.anr.state.vt.us/furbearer/way_of_life.html
- To reach "Fur Trapping and Trading: An Important Industry to a Young Country" go to: <http://www.outdooralabama.com/outdoor-alabama/furtrading.pdf>