

## NOTES ON FURS

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The sea otter and beaver provided the most important skins on the Fur Coast but they were not the only animals hunted. The sea cow was hunted to extinction for food and skins in just 27 years. The sea otter was almost driven to extinction. Millions of seals were killed. Whales soon became the next victims.

Almost every mammal with fur was trapped, snared, speared or shot. Lynx, marten, minks, fishers, foxes, wolves, coyotes, mountain lion, bears, deer and wolverine were taken. The removal of so many top predators led to major ecosystem changes. Even smaller mammals found a market, including squirrels, raccoons, muskrats. There was also a market for feathers from ducks, geese, and swans.

Furs had to be handled well for the best value in the market. HBC brigades included native women and slaves to do much of this work. It was very difficult to dry furs on much of the fur coast and in the mountains in the winter. They had to be flensed (removing any meat or fat) stretched, cleaned and dried. This was challenging and 10-15% of furs were spoiled in transit. If they were packed damp or wet they would rot. Whole shipments were sometimes lost. Ships flooded or shipwrecked and furs were ruined. One vessel lost 100,000 imperfectly cured skins, which on arrival at London had to be dug out of the hold and sold as manure. Markets could also close, particularly the Chinese market — leaving furs in storage in poor conditions waiting for the market to reopen.

The HBC and NWC furs headed east at first. They were compressed into bales of about 90 pounds and made the arduous journey to Montreal by canoe and bateaux. The fur route to Russia was even more difficult. High value furs like sea otter could be packed in kegs if coopers were available.



Bale Press — wedged



Bale Press—screw type

Some presses also used long levers.





Furs were compressed and wrapped for protection but they were still vulnerable during the long trip to market.





Flensing removes the fat and meat from the skin



A heavy load - 180 pounds (81 kg). Often on slippery trails, rocks, mud.

On a portage a strong man might carry 3 bales (270 pounds or 122 kilograms) or more. The packs were carried using a tump line over the forehead—no shoulder straps. Each man could also have 40 pounds of personal gear (not much for six months of travelling).





A good sized beaver pelt





The trapper was usually at a disadvantage, paying a high cost for supplies with no competition between traders. During the fur war competition sometimes led to high prices for furs — even exceeding the market value in London or Canton.