

# **Pennsylvania Native Americans and the Impact of Beaver Pelts Script**

## Verbal

Three main tribes in Pennsylvania in mid 1600's  
Iroquois, Susquehannock, Delaware

Each territory had plenty of beavers, creating pond habitats maybe like the one here (point at pond)  
Native American Uses: killed only what they needed  
Blankets, clothing, shelter

When the Europeans arrived – things began to change  
Some Europeans (brave, entrepreneurs) began to trade with Native Americans

European interest in furs, animal skins – beaver felt hats, mink coats, deerskin jackets

Native Americans could provide the furs, pelts – through hunting (often swim out to lodge, club them)

In exchange, the European traders had many things Native Americans had never seen that would make life easier for them, so trading was established

So as a European trader, I might establish a trust/relationship with a tribe

I might trade some metal pots and spices for some pelts

Other things I might trade – cloth (lace), beads, needles, buttons, mirror, and jewelry

How about something to help the Native Americans hunt better – guns and gunpowder, fish hooks

Other things they traded commonly:  
knives, axes, metal beaver traps  
Everybody is happy (trader and Indians)

Sometimes would trade things that were less appropriate – such as bottles of alcohol, rum  
Native Americans never had this before  
In fact, sometimes traders would give Nat. Amer. lots of rum before trading, taking advantage of their impaired judgment and made unfair trades

## Action

*Divide students into three groups, each representing a tribe and their territory  
Use tribe signs for each group*

*Spread out “beaver” pages on ground for each tribe*

*Show picture of dressed up Europeans*

*Pick a tribe to work with*

*Make a trade - Take some pelts “beaver pages”, give them a few items*

*Make a trade with young lady - Take some pelts, give them items*

*Trade gun for lots of pelts, take all remaining pelts from group*

## Verbal

I have more things to trade and want more pelts, but what has happened to all the beavers in this territory?  
They are gone, so if the Native Americans wanted to keep trading with me, what would they do for more beavers?

Do you think this caused some conflict between tribes?

Yes – tribes would not let other tribes come onto their land and hunt their animals

In fact in the mid 1600s, the Beaver Wars broke out between Pennsylvania's three main tribes – all spurred by the interest in providing beaver pelts to European traders to get more stuff.

What impact did this have on the Beaver population in Pennsylvania? Native Americans were hunting beavers quickly, sometimes with their new guns, as many as possible so they could trade more. So beaver population went from having millions to just thousands.

High demand continued, and the demand of furs and pelts helped spur westward exploration and movement.

Beaver population still suffered even into early 1900s,  
Today, beaver populations have rebounded – with approximately 25,000 in PA.  
Today's pelts - \$25.00

## **Beaver biology 101 lesson**

So here is a BEAVER PELT

- Largest North Amer. rodent 40-60 lb (18.2-27.2 kg)
- Dense underfur with longer guard hairs on top
- Good insulation for being in water
- Musk sacs (castors) very scented substance used to mark territory
- Two other sacs – oily substance to rub on fur to make more water repellent

### BEAVER TAIL

- Unique adaptation. What used for?
  - 1) carpentry tool – but not main use
  - 2) swimming rudder, propeller
  - 3) support when sitting up
  - 4) warning device – slaps water with it

### BEAVER FEET

- Adapted feet
- Back feet – webbed for swimming
- Front feet – versatile, long claws for digging,

## Action

*Get students to answer that they could hunt beavers from a neighboring tribe's territory*

*Pass around beaver pelt*

*Pass out beaver tracks*

manipulating food, working on dams/lodges

### BEAVER HEAD/ SKULL

- Bad eyes, uses smell a lot to find food
- Diving under water, valves can shut ears and nostrils
- Front teeth – dentist nightmare  
Continual growth – must wear down on wood

### BEAVER DIET

What do they eat?

- Vegetable matter: prefer soft plants (grasses, mushrooms, duckweed, stems and roots of water plants)
- Also eat bark, twigs, buds of certain trees.
- Only cut down trees, eat limbs when nothing else available (unless using them for construction)
- After they eat – they produce feces or SCAT

### HABITAT

- Beavers build dams to create flooded, pond habitats to live and eat in
- Instinct, not learned behavior, to build
- New wood instead of old wood – why?
- Lodge to live in
- But also can burrow into banks if cannot build lodge

*Point things out on skull – do not pass around*

*Have various foods that they eat available to show (pass around eaten wood pieces)*

*Pass around SCAT*