

How fashion nearly caused the extermination of the beaver – and how this kind of thing is still happening today.

Beavers are large rodents found across the cooler parts of the northern hemisphere. They are famous for making dams and living in partly submerged lodges.

They are able to live in dammed rivers because they have thick waterproof fur made of an outer coat and an underfur. It was the underfur that was used for hats in 18th and early 19th centuries by middle class men in Europe and the colonies.

This is a very good example of how fashion can cause catastrophe to the natural environment.

This is a well-documented historical example. But it does not belong to history, and you should realise that exactly the same problems exist today. So this is a good example to use for modern poaching and over-exploitation of elephants, whales, rhinoceroses and more.

It seems the greed of mankind still knows no limits.

Watch the video

English/history main task:

During the video students should make a timeline of events. This will mean stopping and starting the video and working out how to summarise what has been said.

Also this question should be answered:

(a) How did hatters come to find out about the beaver's underfur?

Note that the beavers were really only rescued from extinction by a change of fashion for hat fur, not any kindness by people. Nowadays national parks and wildlife reintroduction schemes are helping bring some stocks back.

Students should discuss how hat demand led to wars, and a grab for land. That is, they should understand the law of unintended

consequences and be made aware of it for the environment. They may wish to see how it is happening in the Amazon rainforest and other places. You could also discuss Polar bears and Global Warming in the same context.

Related source books:

Creative topic 810: Frontier

Creative topic 763: Cold lands life, page 138.

Extended work:

Students can ask if anything they use or wear is made from wildlife.