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## The Role of the Fur Trade in Wabanaki Economics

Up until the seventeenth century, the Wabanaki of Maine lived a lifestyle of hunting, fishing, and migration. But when French and English settlers began trading with them, their economy underwent a drastic change – all because of beavers. Could these furry little animals really change an entire culture? The Wabanaki proved that the answer is yes.

Before European contact, Wabanaki tribes were mainly independent. They hunted and fished for their own food using homemade weapons. Though there was some trading among family bands, the Wabanaki were not reliant on trade goods. Instead of living on the coast all year round and getting imported food in the winter, they migrated inland to hunt game themselves. Everything they owned, wore, and ate came from the land.

All that changed when the Europeans arrived and began to trade with the Wabanaki. European settlers gave them shiny objects that they had never seen before. The Wabanaki gave the settlers beaver pelts in return. In 1608, Samuel de Champlain started the first trading post at what is now Quebec, and the beaver fur trade continued to grow. This was the beginning of a trade relationship that would last for centuries.

At the time, beavers were nearly extinct in Europe. Hats made from beaver fur were in style, and the New World offered a huge supply. The demand was so high for beavers that the Wabanaki began hunting them much more than before. Before the

Europeans had arrived, the Wabanaki hunted beavers for their meat, their fur to make clothes, and their teeth to make knives. Now, instead of using the animals only to support themselves, they traded them to the French and English in return for things like knives, kettles, food, clothing, alcohol, and muskets. Beavers became the primary animal that they hunted, and often they spent more time hunting beavers than hunting food for their families. With all of the new things they obtained, the Wabanaki culture became more and more like that of the Europeans: they wore European clothes, hunted with European weapons, ate European food, and cooked with European kettles. There was no question that their culture and economy were permanently altered.

Not only did the fur trade cause the Wabanaki to dress, hunt, and eat like the Europeans, it also made them dependent on the foreigners. Since the muskets they received were much more effective than the weapons they already had, soon almost every Native American hunter had one. Because of this, they became dependent on European traders for their livelihood. Without the muskets, they couldn't hunt beavers, and without the beavers, they couldn't get the goods that they needed to live.

Alcoholism was also a new influence in the lives of the Wabanaki, who had never seen or tried alcohol before and did not know of its harmful effects. The Wabanaki leaders did not approve of drunkenness, saying it made their people act like madmen. Wabanakis who became alcoholics were even more dependent on the European traders, who supplied liquor, than they had been before. Alcoholism also led to increased violence in Wabanaki tribes.

Yet another result of the fur trade was conflict between tribes. The Wabanaki were already enemies with the Mohawk Indians, who lived in present-day New York

State, and arguments over land for fur trapping were the last straw. Mohawks were hunting beavers in Wabanaki territory, and the Wabanaki were not happy about this. These new conflicts led to violence and raids on both sides. Eventually, there was an attempted peace conference, but it ended in fighting after a Mohawk entered with wounds from a Wabanaki attack.

By the time the fur trade began to diminish in the 1800s, the Wabanaki economy – and consequently their culture – had changed drastically. They had gone from a life of hunting and fishing to one of trading, negotiating, and fighting. The Wabanaki were practically a different people, all because of that one industry: the fur trade.

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