

## Chapter 16

# Using Furbearers



**Content Standard** - *Students demonstrate an understanding of the full value of harvested furbearers*

### Introduction

Responsible trappers make full use of furbearers they harvest. The primary value of a pelt is for clothing, but furbearers also are used for human food, pet food, glands, skulls and fertilizer. Making the most of what you catch is one of the many responsibilities that come with trapping.



Silvertip Productions

Beaver caught in a body-gripping trap.



### ***A commodity in a global market***

Furs are a worldwide commodity. Their value at a given time is determined by supply (the number of pelts for sale) and demand (the number of pelts needed for manufacturing garments). Much of the demand for furs comes from markets in Europe, Russia and Asia. Therefore, the economic health and buying power of these regions affect their demand for raw furs and the return you receive for your pelts.

Manufacturers usually hire a broker to fill orders for pelts. When possible, buyers deal directly with brokers to resell your pelts. Buyers who don't have contracts with brokers resell your pelts to other buyers. This might take place several times before your pelts make their way to a broker.

Buyers' profits come from selling your pelts for more than they paid after accounting for their time and expenses. They usually operate on a narrow margin, and a sudden shift in supply or demand can increase their profit or turn it into loss.

While it's rare to meet a trapper without a story about being "taken" by a fur buyer, it's even rarer to find a fur buyer who stayed in business by cheating customers. Established fur buyers provide a fair market return to keep your business. The return can vary from buyer to buyer, but it's usually in the same ballpark. To get the best possible return for your furs:

Taxidermists often look for high quality specimens to mount.

Check regulations.

Animals with unusual pelts, such as albinos, may bring top dollar from taxidermists, but little from a fur buyer.



- Monitor market conditions by following reports in trade magazines.
- Shop around if you have doubts about an offer – you aren't committed to taking it.
- Take pride in the way you handle your furs – clean, well-handled furs without damage are worth more in any market.

At auctions, the sponsors charge customers a commission – usually a set percentage of your proceeds. This fee pays for the sponsor's expenses and includes their profits. Most state trapper association-sponsored auctions allow you to set a minimum bid price for your furs. International auctions don't allow you to set a minimum bid, but the sponsors can withdraw a lot if the price doesn't meet their expectations. After all, their profits are tied directly to yours.

 **Know the advantages, disadvantages, and procedures for five ways to sell furbearers or pelts**

Fur harvesters have five choices for selling fur. There are advantages and disadvantages for each method. Options include:

- Local fur buyers
- Traveling fur buyers
- Selling by mail
- Fur auctions
- Tan hides and sell them yourself

Local fur buyers will know the most about furbearers in your area. They can be a valuable source of information and experience.

If you live close to a fur buyer you can sell whole animals as you catch them. This is known as selling furbearers "in the round." This is an advantage if you don't have a good place to process fur and store it. A local buyer can also give you specific tips on fur handling, or possibly show you the best techniques. Local buyers also buy "green" pelts. Green pelts are skinned but not fleshed, stretched, and dried.



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Fox pelt on stretcher.



FWS Photo

Fox furs.



If you are fortunate enough to live near several fur buyers, you can shop around for the best price. This is generally best if you have a large number of furs. A disadvantage of selling to a local buyer is price. A local buyer is a “middle man” who must buy low and sell high to make a living.

Traveling fur buyers work for larger companies. You may be able to meet them at a local sporting goods store on scheduled dates, or make an appointment for them to visit you. Traveling buyers make it convenient for you to sell fur, but the price you receive may be lower than the price you could get selling by mail or at auction.



Silvertip Productions

Trapper bagging fresh muskrat for freezer.

Some trappers sell their fur by mail. Mail buyers advertise in trapping magazines. Selling by mail saves you the time and cost of driving a long distance. Mail buyers will usually make payment in a few days. Mail buyers do not charge a commission, and some will pay the shipping costs. Some will also give you 10 days or so to decide if you like the offering price. If not, they will return your furs.

Price lists for mail buyers can be deceiving. Prices can change, or a buyer may give you a good offer for some of your furs and downgrade the rest. When selling by mail you lose the advantage of having competitive bidding for your fur.

Fur auctions are another option. Your fur may bring a higher price at an auction if there are a large number of buyers. Commissions paid to buyers or auction houses will reduce the money you receive. Fur prices can change during the season. Top offers at an auction may be less than the offer you could have had from a local buyer if the price drops while you wait for the auction.



Beaver castor glands.

Another option is to have the hides tanned and sell them yourself. You may be able to obtain a higher price for them. Disadvantages to this method are that you have to pay for the tanning and you have to locate buyers. This may take more time than some of the other options.

Each trapper must decide when and how to sell fur based on current prices, price forecasts, convenience, and cost. Other trappers, magazines, and trapping associations can provide helpful information. The more you know about grading fur and market conditions, the better the chance you will earn a good price for your work.



***Know that fur buyers will grade animals or pelts by primeness, size, color, texture, fur density, damage, and other characteristics***

Fur buyers grade pelts by a number of factors before offering you a price. Pelt size, primeness, fur density, color, texture, and damage affect the grade.

Larger sized animals of one species generally bring a better price than smaller ones. Pelt primeness is a major grading factor. Trapping seasons are set to harvest furbearers when they are prime, during winter. Summer pelts are thin, flat, and have little to no value. Prime pelts have dense underfur and fully developed guard hairs. The skin, or leather, side of an unprimed pelt is dark blue or black because the hair follicles are not fully developed. Later in the season furs may not be worth as much because of fading color, hair loss, rubbing, or curling. Furs can also be damaged by careless handling.

The best pelts are graded as “Ones” (I) or “Ones part Twos” (I pt. II). Seconds are lower quality due to slight damage, color, or other factors. Thirds (III’s) are badly rubbed. Unprimed and fourths (IV’s) are of very little, if any, value.



***Know that meat from some furbearers can be used for human consumption***

Many people enjoy eating meat from healthy beaver, muskrats, raccoons, opossums, and bobcats. Freshly caught, skinned, and dressed animals will taste the best. The front and hind quarters and back meat are most commonly eaten, while the rib-cage area is usually discarded. Avoid meat from any animals that appear sick. Keep the carcasses clean and thoroughly cook any wild game you intend to eat. Please be aware that carnivores may harbor parasites and extra care must be taken when dressing the animal and preparing the meat. Make sure that the meat is cooked to the proper temperature and that the juices run clear. The recommended minimum internal cooking temperature for fubearer meat is 165 degrees Fahrenheit.



Silvertip Productions

Beaver skull.



### ***Know that glands from some furbearers can be made into lure or sold for commercial use as perfume***

Castor glands and oil sacs are found below the skin in the anal area of both male and female beaver. Castor glands and oil sacs are valuable and can be removed. Trappers can sell the glands for use in perfume or trapping lure.

Mink, weasel, skunk, otter, and fisher have anal glands that contain a strong musk useful in making trapping lure. The glands should be cut loose with minimal squeezing and kept cool or frozen. Weasel glands are particularly good for attracting mink, otter, weasel, fox, and coyotes.

Fox and coyote anal glands and foot pads are used in lure making for those species. Glands of raccoons, opossums, badgers, and muskrats are sometimes used, too.



### ***Know that furbearer skulls are sometimes needed for science classes or nature interpretation***

Furbearer skulls are often needed for science classes or nature centers. Dermestid beetles are useful for cleaning skulls or other bones you want to save. Skulls or other bones may also be cleaned by hot water (boiling) or cold water maceration. Details on skull and bone cleaning may be found at various online sites. You may also visit [www.michigan.gov/dnr](http://www.michigan.gov/dnr) under the Trapping and Furharvester pages for more details.



### ***Describe why it is important to properly dispose of any animal parts that remain after processing***

Responsible trappers use as much of each animal trapped as possible. Any remaining parts should be taken to a rendering plant, used for fertilizer, incinerated, or buried (less than three feet deep). You may be able to dispose of carcasses in a registered landfill via commercial garbage pick up (check with your local garbage service). It is important to dispose of carcasses where they can't be scavenged by other animals or act as a source of infection for their own species. Improper disposal could lead to human or animal health problems. Other people could be offended by seeing animal carcasses and parts. This gives all trappers and the sport of trapping a bad image. Public image and acceptance is important to the future of trapping in this state. Disposal methods may be regulated in some areas.

**Content Standard - Students demonstrate an understanding of the full value of harvested furbearers.**

**Know the advantages, disadvantages, and procedures for five ways to sell furbearers or pelts (page 131).**

- List five ways to sell fur:

1. Local \_\_\_\_\_
2. Traveling \_\_\_\_\_
3. Selling by \_\_\_\_\_
4. Fur \_\_\_\_\_
5. Tan \_\_\_\_\_

- Choose the method you think you will use to sell fur, and explain why in the space below:

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Know that furbuyers will grade animals or pelts by primeness, size, color, texture, fur density, damage, and other characteristics (page 133).**

- Furbearer pelts are prime during \_\_\_\_\_
- Prime pelts have dense \_\_\_\_\_ and fully developed \_\_\_\_\_ hairs.

**Know that meat from some furbearers can be used for human consumption (page 133).**

- Name three kinds of furbearers found in Michigan that can be eaten by people:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

**Know that glands from some furbearers can be made into lure or sold for commercial use as perfume (page 134).**

- Male and female beaver have \_\_\_\_\_ glands and oil \_\_\_\_\_ that trappers can sell.

**Know that furbearer skulls are sometimes needed for science classes or nature interpretation (page 134).**

- Dermestid \_\_\_\_\_ are useful for cleaning skulls and other bones to use in science classes.

**Describe why it is important to properly dispose of any animal parts that remain after processing (page 134).**

- Improper disposal of animal parts could lead to \_\_\_\_\_ or \_\_\_\_\_ health problems.